

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK**

EMANUEL M. BROOKS, JR.,

Plaintiff,

v.

9:11-CV-1171 (GLS/ATB)

P. ROCK, et al.,

Defendants.

EMANUEL M. BROOKS, JR., Plaintiff, *pro se*
STEPHEN M. KERWIN, Ass't Att'y Gen., for the Defendants

ANDREW T. BAXTER, U.S. MAGISTRATE JUDGE

REPORT-RECOMMENDATION

Presently before the court is the defendants' motion for summary judgment pursuant to Fed. R. Civ. P. 56. (Dkt. No. 42). This matter was referred for Report and Recommendation on May 22, 2013 by Chief U.S. District Judge Gary L. Sharpe, pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 636 (b) and Local Rules N.D.N.Y. 72.3(c).

On October 31, 2012, defendants filed a motion to dismiss plaintiff's civil rights action for failure to state a claim pursuant to Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(b)(6). (Dkt. No. 31). Plaintiff responded (Dkt. No. 36) and defendants filed a reply (Dkt. No. 37). By Decision and Order dated March 29, 2013, this court converted the Rule 12(b)(6) motion to one for summary judgment, and provided the parties with an opportunity to file supplemental papers. (Dkt. No 38). On May 20, 2013, defendants filed a complete motion for summary judgment (Dkt. Nos. 42, 43), but also continued to rely on papers submitted in connection with the prior Rule 12(b)(6) motion. Plaintiff has opposed the motion for summary judgment (Dkt. No. 52); he has also filed two

motions for preliminary injunctions, one of which included a motion for appointment of counsel (Dkt. Nos. 54, 58), to which defendants have responded (Dkt. Nos. 57, 59).

For the reasons set forth below, this court recommends that defendants' motion for summary judgment be granted on most of the grounds raised therein, and that plaintiff's complaint be dismissed in its entirety. In light of this recommendation, this court also recommends that plaintiff's motion for appointment of counsel be denied and his motions for preliminary injunctions be found moot.

BACKGROUND

On and before June 15, 2011, plaintiff was confined by the New York Department of Corrections and Community Supervision ("DOCCS") at the Clinton Correctional Facility ("Clinton") in Danemora, in the northeastern corner of New York. Plaintiff alleges that, on that date, Correction Officer ("C.O.") P. Rock "bust open" the door to the bathroom that plaintiff was using, causing the door to hit him extremely hard in the forehead. (Compl., Dkt. No. 1 at 5).¹ Although plaintiff was injured, defendant Rock refused to take plaintiff for immediate medical attention; and plaintiff did not receive any medical care until two days later. (*Id.*).

C.O. Rock prepared a misbehavior report, charging plaintiff with smoking in the bathroom, a copy of which was served on plaintiff at 7:00 a.m. on June 16th. (*Id.*; Dkt. No. 36 at 67). Plaintiff attached to his complaint a letter, dated June 15th, addressed to Superintendent LaValley, complaining about C.O. Rock's conduct earlier

¹ Because plaintiff's complaint does not have consecutive pagination or consistent paragraph numbering, the court will refer to the page numbers assigned by the CM-ECF system in the document header.

that day. (Dkt. No. 1 at 12). Plaintiff claims that he also filed a formal grievance with respect to the incident involving defendant Rock and later submitted appeals when he received no response to his initial grievance. (Compl., Dkt. No. 1 at 3-4, 13-20).

Lt. Chase² conducted a disciplinary hearing and found plaintiff not guilty on the misbehavior report filed by C.O. Rock. Plaintiff alleges that defendant Chase stated that, although he could not “get me at this facility[,] . . . he was going to get me at the next one.” (Compl., Dkt. No. 1 at 5). Plaintiff further alleges that, although he had requested a transfer to the Sing Sing Correctional Facility (“Sing Sing”), Supt. LaValley had plaintiff promptly transferred to Coxsackie Correctional Facility (Coxsackie), in retaliation for the complaint against C.O. Rock, which plaintiff submitted to defendant LaValley. (Compl., Dkt. No. 1 at 6, 7; Dkt. No. 36 at 40).

On July 7, 2011, shortly after his arrival at Coxsackie, Counselor Paquette-Monthie issued plaintiff a misbehavior report for placing telephone calls to his wife from other facilities, in violation of an order of protection issued in connection with an earlier prosecution of plaintiff. (Compl., Dkt. No. 1 at 7; Dkt. No. 31-2 at 2). Plaintiff alleges that defendant Paquette-Monthie wrote the misbehavior report in retaliation for plaintiff’s complaint about C.O. Rock at Clinton. (Compl., Dkt. No. 1 at 7). In exhibits attached to his response to the Rule 12(b)(6) motion, plaintiff claimed that Counselor Paquette-Monthie told him that she initiated the disciplinary charges against him at Coxsackie because he filed a complaint against a friend of hers at

² Plaintiff incorrectly refers to defendant Peter **Chase** as “P. **Chaste**.” The court will use this defendant’s correct name.

Clinton Annex. (Dkt. No. 36 at 31, 37, 40).

Defendant Eric Gutwein³ presided over plaintiff's disciplinary hearing at Coxsackie. (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 1, Dkt. No. 42-15). Plaintiff alleges that Hearing Officer Gutwein, participating in the retaliatory conspiracy against plaintiff because of his complaints at Clinton, denied plaintiff's many requests for witnesses and additional evidence, found plaintiff guilty of the charges, and sentenced him to six months in the Special Housing Unit ("SHU") and a six-month loss of good time. (Compl., Dkt. No. 1 at 7-8).

Liberally construed, plaintiff's complaint alleges that his constitutional rights under the First, Eighth, and Fourteenth Amendments were violated because (1) he was subjected to cruel and unusual punishment by defendant Rock when she allegedly hit him in the head with the bathroom door; (2) he was improperly denied prompt medical care by defendant Rock; (3) he was retaliated against for filing complaints and grievances by defendants Rock, Chase, LaValley, Paquette-Monthie,⁴ and Gutwein in connection with the initiation and adjudication of disciplinary charges at Clinton, his transfer to Coxsackie, and the initiation and adjudication of disciplinary charges at Coxsackie; and (4) he was denied due process in connection with the adjudication of

³ The complaint lists the hearing officer as Eric Mutuein (Compl., Dkt. No. 1 at 2), but this court will use his correct name herein.

⁴ The complaint names as defendants R. Paquette, Counselor and Monthie, "Counselor [sic] Supervisor." As noted, the counselor who initiated the disciplinary charges against plaintiff is named Roberta Paquette-Monthie. Ms. Paquette-Monthie's supervisor, who testified at plaintiff's disciplinary hearing, but was not at work the day the misbehavior report was issued, is Supervising Correction Counselor Chenel. (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 8, 52). Supervising Correction Counselor Chenel has not been served in this action.

the disciplinary charges at Cossackie.⁵ Plaintiff demands damages, as well as injunctive relief, including the termination of the defendants by DOCCS, a formal apology from the defendants, a transfer to the prison of his choice, and protection from further retaliation at DOCCS. (Compl., Dkt. No. 1 at 10-11).

Defendants have challenged each of plaintiff's claims and have filed numerous declarations contesting many of plaintiff's factual allegations. In moving for summary judgment with respect to the claims against defendants Rock, Chase, and LaValley, defendants contend that plaintiff failed to exhaust his administrative remedies because, *inter alia*, he never filed a formal grievance with respect to any of these defendants at Clinton. (Defs.' Mem. of Law at 14-16, Dkt. No. 42-17).

Defendant Rock denies that she hit the plaintiff with a bathroom door on June 15, 2011, and she alleges that plaintiff did not request medical attention on that date, nor did he appear to require medical attention. (Rock Decl. ¶¶ 8-12, Dkt. No. 42-2). Plaintiff was seen by the medical staff at Clinton on June 17th and complained of a headache relating to being hit on the head by a mess hall door two days earlier. There was no evidence of a bump, swelling, or bruising, and plaintiff was treated with Ibuprofen and given a bag of ice. (Michalek Decl. ¶ 5, Dkt. No. 42-9). C.O. Rock was unaware of any complaint or grievance filed against her by plaintiff, and denies knowing defendant Paquette-Monthie or causing her to issue a misbehavior report

⁵ To avoid dismissal of his due process claims under *Heck v. Humphrey*, 512 U.S. 477 (1994), plaintiff filed a *Peralta* waiver relinquishing any due process claims with respect to his loss of good time. (Dkt. Nos. 7, 9, 12, 13, 15-17). See *Peralta v. Vasquez*, 467 F.3d 98, 105-106 (2d Cir. 2006).

against plaintiff at Coxsackie. (Rock Decl. ¶¶ 14-17).

Defendant Chase, who found plaintiff not guilty on the disciplinary charges filed by C.O. Rock, denies ever threatening plaintiff, and had no knowledge that he filed any complaint or grievance against defendant Rock. Lt. Chase asserts that he did nothing to cause defendant Paquette-Monthie—whom he does not know—or anyone else, to retaliate against plaintiff. (Chase Decl. ¶¶ 7-14, Dkt. No. 42-3). Clinton Supt. LaValley also denies knowing defendant Paquette-Monthie or doing anything to induce her to file a misbehavior report against plaintiff at Coxsackie. Defendant LaValley asserts that he had no involvement in plaintiff’s transfer to Coxsackie; that transfer was handled by the DOCCS Deputy Superintendent for Programs pursuant to a prior request by plaintiff for an “area of preference” transfer. (LaValley Decl. ¶¶ 7-15, Dkt. No. 42-4).

DOCCS Counselor Paquette-Monthie filed a misbehavior report against plaintiff at Coxsackie after learning, through her intake interview of plaintiff and information in his file, that he had been contacting his wife by telephone. Such contact violated an order-of-protection issued against plaintiff and contravened prior direct orders from the staff at Sing Sing that plaintiff should stop calling his wife. Defendant Paquette-Monthie denies knowing defendants Rock, Chase, or LaValley at Clinton, and states that she did not file the misbehavior report for retaliatory purposes. (Paquette-Monthie Decl. ¶¶ 6-15, Dkt. No. 42-12).

Defendant Gutwein, who presided over the disciplinary hearing at Coxsackie also denied knowing defendant Rock, or knowing that she had been the target of a

prior complaint by plaintiff. Defendant Gutwein claims that he made his documented decisions regarding the evidence allowed at the hearing, the ultimate determination of plaintiff's guilt, and the punishment imposed, based on the merits, and not because of any retaliatory motive. (Gutwein Decl. ¶¶ 5-34, Dkt. No. 42-14).

The court concludes that there are material issues of fact as to whether plaintiff exhausted his administrative remedies relating to his claims against defendant Rock, but no issues of fact as to whether he failed to properly exhaust claims with respect to defendants Chase and LaValley. However, this court recommends dismissal of all of plaintiff's claims on the merits, because no rational fact finder could conclude that the defendants violated plaintiff's various constitutional rights, as he alleges.

DISCUSSION

I. Summary Judgment

Summary judgment is appropriate where there exists no genuine issue of material fact and, based on the undisputed facts, the moving party is entitled to judgment as a matter of law. Fed. R. Civ. P. 56; *Salahuddin v. Goord*, 467 F.3d 263, 272–73 (2d Cir. 2006). “Only disputes over [“material”] facts that might affect the outcome of the suit under the governing law will properly preclude the entry of summary judgment.” *Anderson v. Liberty Lobby*, 477 U.S. 242, 248 (1986). It must be apparent that no rational finder of fact could find in favor of the non-moving party for a court to grant a motion for summary judgment. *Gallo v. Prudential Residential Servs.*, 22 F.3d 1219, 1224 (2d Cir. 1994).

The moving party has the burden to show the absence of disputed material facts

by informing the court of portions of pleadings, depositions, and affidavits which support the motion. *Celotex Corp. v. Catrett*, 477 U.S. 317, 323 (1986). If the moving party satisfies its burden, the nonmoving party must move forward with specific facts showing that there is a genuine issue for trial. *Salahuddin v. Goord*, 467 F.3d at 273. In that context, the nonmoving party must do more than “simply show that there is some metaphysical doubt as to the material facts.” *Matsushita Electric Industrial Co., Ltd. v. Zenith Radio Corp.*, 475 U.S. 574, 586 (1986). However, in determining whether there is a genuine issue of material fact, a court must resolve all ambiguities, and draw all inferences, against the movant. *See United States v. Diebold, Inc.*, 369 U.S. 654, 655 (1962); *Salahuddin v. Goord*, 467 F.3d at 272.

II. Exhaustion of Administrative Remedies

Defendants contend that, notwithstanding plaintiff’s claims to the contrary, he failed to initiate the grievance process, in a timely and proper manner, with respect to his complaints against defendants Rock, Chase, and LaValley of Clinton Correctional Facility. Defense counsel argues that, even if plaintiff had filed a timely grievance with respect to these defendants, he failed to exhaust his administrative remedies by not pursuing an appeal to the Central Office Review Committee (CORC). (Defs.’ Mem. of Law at 14-16).

The court concludes that there are issues of fact material to whether plaintiff has exhausted his administrative remedies with respect to the claims against defendant Rock, which may not be resolved on summary judgment. However, no reasonable fact finder could conclude that the plaintiff filed timely grievances relating to his claims

against defendants Chase regarding the disciplinary charges initiated at Clinton, or against defendant LaValley with respect to plaintiff's transfer from Clinton to Coxsackie. Accordingly I will recommend that those claims be dismissed on summary judgment based, *inter alia*, on plaintiff's failure to exhaust administrative remedies.

A. Applicable Law

The Prison Litigation Reform Act ("PLRA"), 42 U.S.C. §1997e(a), requires an inmate to exhaust all available administrative remedies prior to bringing a federal civil rights action. This requirement applies to all inmate suits about prison life, whether they involve general circumstances or particular episodes, and regardless of the subject matter of the claim. *See Giano v. Goord*, 380 F.3d 670, 675-76 (2d Cir. 2004) (citing *Porter v. Nussle*, 534 U.S. 516, 532 (2002)). Inmates must exhaust their administrative remedies even if they are seeking only money damages that are not available in prison administrative proceedings. *Id.* at 675.

The failure to exhaust is an affirmative defense that must be raised by the defendants. *Jones v. Bock*, 549 U.S. 199, 216 (2007); *Johnson v. Testman*, 380 F.3d 691, 695 (2d Cir. 2004). As an affirmative defense, it is the defendants' burden to establish that plaintiff failed to meet the exhaustion requirements. *See, e.g., Key v. Toussaint*, 660 F. Supp. 2d 518, 523 (S.D.N.Y. 2009) (citations omitted).

The Supreme Court held that, in order to properly exhaust an inmate's administrative remedies, he must complete the administrative review process in accordance with the applicable state rules. *Jones v. Bock*, 549 U.S. at 218-19 (citing *Woodford v. Ngo*, 548 U.S. 81 (2006)). In *Woodford*, the Court held that "proper"

exhaustion means that the inmate must complete the administrative review process in accordance with the applicable procedural rules, including deadlines, as a prerequisite to bringing suit in federal court. 548 U.S. at 90-103.

The grievance procedure in New York is a three-tiered process. The inmate must first file a grievance with the Inmate Grievance Resolution Committee (IGRC). N.Y. Comp. Codes R. & Regs. tit. 7, §§ 701.5(a)(1) and (b). An adverse decision of the IGRC may be appealed to the Superintendent of the Facility. *Id.* § 701.5(c). Adverse decisions at the Superintendent's level may be appealed to the Central Office Review Committee (CORC). *Id.* § 701.5(d). The court also notes that the regulations governing the Inmate Grievance Program encourage the inmate to “resolve his/her complaints through the guidance and counseling unit, the program area directly affected, or other existing channels (informal or formal) prior to submitting a grievance.” *Id.* § 701.3(a) (Inmate’s Responsibility).

At the same time that the Second Circuit decided *Giano*, it also decided four related cases, clarifying the law in the Second Circuit regarding the PLRA’s exhaustion requirement, and specifying various instances in which the requirement could be waived or excused.⁶ Based on these cases, the Second Circuit developed a

⁶ See *Hemphill v. State of New York*, 380 F.3d 680 (2d Cir. 2004) (remanding case to determine if defendant’s alleged threats constituted “special circumstances” justifying plaintiff’s failure to exhaust); *Abney v. McGinnis*, 380 F.3d 663 (2d Cir. 2004) (whether failure to exhaust may be justified because plaintiff obtained favorable rulings on his grievances, but the relief that he was supposed to obtain was never forthcoming); *Johnson v. Testman*, 380 F.3d 691 (2d Cir. 2004) (whether including claims in a disciplinary appeal may suffice for the exhaustion requirement); *Ortiz v. McBride*, 380 F.3d 649 (2d Cir. 2004) (complete dismissal is not required when plaintiff brings both exhausted and unexhausted civil rights claims).

“three part inquiry” to determine whether an inmate has fulfilled the PLRA exhaustion requirement. *See Brownell v. Krom*, 446 F.3d 305, 311-12 (2d Cir. 2006) (citing *Hemphill*, 380 F.3d at 686). The inquiry asks (1) whether the administrative remedies were available to the inmate; (2) whether defendants’ own actions inhibiting exhaustion estops them from raising the defense; and (3) whether “special circumstances” justify the inmate’s failure to comply with the exhaustion requirement. *Id.* Whether the *Hemphill* test survives following the Supreme Court’s decision in *Woodford*, has been a matter of some speculation.⁷ Although the Second Circuit has not explicitly held that *Hemphill* remains good law, it has applied the three-part inquiry in post-*Woodford* cases. *See, e.g., Messa v. Goord*, 652 F.3d 305, 309 (2d Cir. 2011); *Davis v. State of New York*, 311 F. App’x 397, 399 (2d Cir. 2009).

B. Analysis

Defense counsel attempts to rebut plaintiff’s allegation that he filed a timely initial grievance with respect to his claims against defendants Rock, Chase, and LaValley, purported copies of which are attached to the complaint. (Defs.’ Mem. of Law at 14-16). Clinton Superintendent LaValley declared that his office had no record of receiving any letter from plaintiff raising the allegations contained in the complaint in this action, and had no recollection of receiving any such letter, including those attached to the complaint. (LaValley Decl. ¶ 5-6). Tara Brousseau, the Inmate Grievance Program (“IGP”) Supervisor at Clinton, found no documentation in her

⁷ See, e.g., *Newman v. Duncan*, 04-CV-395 (TJM/DRH), 2007 WL 2847304, at * 2 n. 4 (N.D.N.Y. Sept. 26, 2007); *Shariff v. Coombe*, 655 F. Supp. 2d 274, 285-86 n.7 (S.D.N.Y. 2009).

files indicating that plaintiff ever submitted a formal grievance at Clinton regarding plaintiff's allegations against defendants Rock, Chase, and LaValley. (Brousseau Decl. ¶¶ 8-11, Dkt. No. 42-6). Defense counsel contends that the documentation provided by plaintiff in his complaint contained no "acknowledg[ment] from any recipient that his document was received in a timely manner so as to comply with DOCCS grievance procedures." (Defs.' Mem. of Law at 14). Counsel also points out inconsistencies in plaintiff's claims regarding the submission of his initial grievance, including the fact that the "Affidavit of Service," attached to his complaint (Dkt. No. 1 at 18) swears that he placed a grievance regarding defendant Rock in a mailbox at Clinton on June 26, 2011—two days after plaintiff was transferred out of that facility, according to DOCCS transfer records. (Defs.' Mem. of Law at 16).⁸

In his response to defendants' summary judgment motion, plaintiff has filed additional documentation regarding some of his complaints to DOCCS about the alleged violations of his constitutional rights by defendant Rock at Clinton. (Dkt. No. 52-11 at 4, 7, 13, 21). The newly-disclosed records include a memorandum, purportedly signed by Supt. LaValley, acknowledging receipt of a communication from plaintiff on June 17, 2011—two days after plaintiff claims he submitted his original letter of complaint about defendant Rock to the Clinton Superintendent (Dkt. No. 52-11 at 4-5). In the absence of any reply from defendants questioning the

⁸ According to DOCCS records, plaintiff was moved from Clinton Annex to Downstate Correctional Facility on June 24, 2011; then to Cossackie on June 27, 2011; and on to Upstate Correctional Facility on July 22, 2011. (LaValley Decl. ¶ 11 & Ex. B, Dkt. No. 42-5 at 4; Brousseau Decl. ¶ 8).

authenticity of the memorandum, this would seem to confirm plaintiff's allegation that he sent the letter dated June 15th to defendant LaValley, even if that complaint about defendant Rock would not qualify as a formal grievance for exhaustion purposes.⁹

Plaintiff also filed a July 18, 2011 memorandum from N. Ratliff, then the IGP Supervisor at Clinton, acknowledging receipt, from plaintiff, of a "complaint dated 7/14/11/6/24/11," which would appear to refer, in part, to plaintiff's "Affidavit of Service," notarized July 14, 2011 and addressed, *inter alia*, to Ratliff, regarding a grievance about defendant Rock. (Dkt. No. 52-11 at 7, 14).¹⁰ Plaintiff's papers in opposition to the summary judgment motions include two slightly different complaints directed to N. Ratliff and the Inmate Grievance Committee regarding defendant Rock, each dated June 26, 2011. (Dkt. No. 52-11 at 8-9, 15-16). Given that N. Ratliff's memorandum reference a "complaint" dated, *inter alia*, June 24th—the day plaintiff was moved out of Clinton—it is not entirely clear which version of plaintiff's "complaint"

⁹ As plaintiff appears to acknowledge, a letter of complaint to the facility superintendent would not qualify as a formal grievance required to exhaust administrative remedies, unless the informal complaint produced a resolution favoring the inmate. *See, e.g., Goodson v. Silver*, 9:09-CV-494 (GTS/DRH), 2012 WL 4449937 at *9 & n.20 (N.D.N.Y. Sept. 25, 2012) (district courts have interpreted *Marvin v. Goord*, 255 F.3d 40, 43 (2d Cir. 2001), to mean that an inmate's efforts to resolve a matter through informal channels satisfies the exhaustion requirement only if the efforts resulted in the matter being concluded in the inmate's favor) (collecting cases); *Shomo v. Goord*, 9:04-CV-707 (LEK/DEP), 2007 WL 2693526, at *9 (N.D.N.Y. Sept. 11, 2007) (courts have repeatedly held that complaint letters to the DOCCS Commissioner or the facility Superintendent do not satisfy the PLRA's exhaustion requirements) (collecting cases).

¹⁰ The copy of the July 14th Affidavit of Service has two receipt stamps from DOCCS—one dated 9/1/2011 and the other of which has the date obscured. It appears that a copy of the Affidavit of Service was sent to other DOCCS officials in Albany in September 2011. In the absence of a reply from defendants questioning the authenticity of the document, and construing the facts in favor of the non-movant, as I must, the court will assume that N. Ratliff at Clinton received a copy of the Affidavit of Service at some time between July 14, when the affidavit was notarized, and July 18, 2011, when N. Ratliff sent the confirming memorandum to plaintiff.

Ratliff received or how and when she received it. However, a rational fact finder could conclude that, contrary to the assertion by Tara Brousseau, a complaint against defendant Rock from plaintiff was received at Clinton, notwithstanding the uncertainty regarding the dates. The memorandum from N. Ratliff returned plaintiff's "complaint" because he was no longer housed at Clinton and because an inmate is supposed to file grievances in the facility where he is confined, even if it relates to conduct at another institution. Neither party has submitted any information as to whether plaintiff thereafter submitted a grievance regarding the earlier events at Clinton to officials at the DOCCS institutions to which he was transferred or that he sought an extension of the deadline for submitting an initial grievance.

There are some discrepancies in plaintiff's various claims about his submission(s), to DOCCS, of a grievance about the alleged violations of his rights at Clinton. In some statements, including his recent response to the declaration of Tara Brousseau, plaintiff claims that he submitted a grievance about defendant Rock to the IGP supervisor at Clinton on June 15, 2011, and that the letter that he sent to Supt. LaValley on the same date was a copy of the grievance. (Dkt. No. 52-9 at 2).¹¹ In other statements, including his "Affidavit of Service," plaintiff asserts that he filed an initial grievance at Clinton on or about June 26, 2011, which is also the date on several versions of the complaints against defendant Rock that plaintiff filed with his complaint and his response to the summary judgment motion. (Dkt. No. 52-11 at 8-9,

¹¹ Nothing on the face of plaintiff's June 15, 2011 letter to Supt. LaValley indicates that a copy was submitted to grievance officials. (Dkt. No. 52-11 at 5).

14-18). However, there are also discrepancies between the documents recently filed by plaintiff and some of the statements of DOCCS witnesses regarding plaintiff's submission of complaints—*i.e.*, Supt. LaValley's claim that his office never received any of the letters attached to plaintiff's complaint and Tara Brousseau's declaration that Clinton IGP never received a grievance from plaintiff about defendant Rock.

Under applicable regulations,¹² an inmate must file a formal grievance within 21 days of an alleged occurrence, although he may make a request for additional time within 45 days of the occurrence, which may be granted in the discretion of the IGP supervisor upon a showing of mitigating circumstances. If the plaintiff properly submitted an initial grievance on June 15, June 24, or June 26, 2011, it would have timely—*i.e.*, within 21 days of the alleged incident involving defendant Rock. If the first grievance was submitted around July 14, 2011, it would have been beyond the 21-day deadline, but within the 45-day period during which the plaintiff could have requested additional time to file, based upon mitigating circumstances. Even if, after his transfer from Clinton, plaintiff filed his initial grievance with the wrong facility, and he did not explicitly ask for additional time to file it properly, the failure of the IGP Supervisor to advise plaintiff of his ability to ask for an extension suggests the possibility that the grievance procedures were not made reasonably available to plaintiff. *See, e.g., Mandell v. Goord*, 9:06-CV-1478 (GTS/DEP), 2009 WL 3123029,

¹² *See* N.Y. Comp. Codes R. & Regs. tit. 7, §§ 701.5(a) (“[a]n inmate must submit a complaint to the clerk within 21 calendar days of an alleged occurrence”), 701.6(g)(1)(b) (“[t]he IGP supervisor may grant an exception to the time limit for filing a grievance based on mitigating circumstances[;] . . . [a]n exception to the time limit may not be granted if the request was made more than 45 days after an alleged occurrence”).

at *10-11 (N.D.N.Y. Sept. 29, 2009) (where DOCCS officials tersely rejected plaintiff's grievance as untimely, without advising the plaintiff that he should request an exception to the time limit from the IGP supervisor based on mitigating circumstances, or that additional information regarding his delay in filing the grievance was needed, it is arguable that material questions of fact exist as to whether administrative remedies were available to the plaintiff or whether the defendants should be estopped by their conduct from relying on the non-exhaustion defense).

It is entirely possible that a finder of fact tasked with weighing the relative credibility of plaintiff and the DOCCS witnesses might conclude, in the face of the inconclusive documentary evidence, that plaintiff did not properly submit a timely initial grievance regarding defendant Rock's alleged violation of plaintiff's rights at Clinton. However, given that the court should not make credibility determinations in connection with a summary judgment motion, and that the defendants have the ultimate burden of proving that plaintiff did not exhaust his administrative remedies, there appears to be a material issue of fact as to whether plaintiff filed a timely initial grievance about defendant Rock or whether his failure to do so should be excused under *Hemphill* standards.

Defendants contend that, even if plaintiff properly filed a timely initial grievance against defendant Rock that was ignored by DOCCS officials, he failed to exhaust his administrative remedies because he never filed an appeal with CORC. (Defs.' Mem. of Law at 15). The Assistant Director of the DOCCS IGP program states, in his declaration, that he found no evidence in the CORC files indicating that

plaintiff ever filed a grievance appeal with CORC concerning the alleged events at Clinton Annex. (Hale Decl. ¶¶ 8-11, Dkt. No. 42-7).

Courts have consistently held that an inmate's general claim that his grievance was lost or destroyed does not excuse the exhaustion requirement. *See e.g. Veloz v. New York*, 339 F. Supp. 2d 505, 516 (S.D.N.Y. 2004) (plaintiff's allegations that his grievances were misplaced or destroyed by corrections officers ultimately does not relieve him of the requirement to appeal those claims to the next level once it became clear that no response was forthcoming) (citing *Martinez v. Williams*, 186 F. Supp. 2d 353, 357 (S.D.N.Y. 2002) (same). "If a plaintiff receives no response to a grievance and then fails to appeal it to the next level, he has failed to exhaust his administrative remedies as required by the PLRA." *Croswell v. McCoy*, 01-CV-547, 2003 WL 962534, at *4 (N.D.N.Y. Mar. 11, 2003) (Sharpe, M.J.).¹³

Plaintiff, however, has submitted documentation indicating that, after receiving no response to the initial grievance he claimed to have filed, he submitted "appeals" to the Superintendent at Clinton and to the IGP Supervisor and the Director of the IGP in Albany. A copy of plaintiff's purported "appeal" to Supt. LaValley, dated July 26, 2011, was attached to his complaint (Dkt. No. 1 at 13), although he has filed no

¹³ The New York regulations specifically state that if a grievance is not decided within the time limits provided, the inmate may appeal to the next step. N.Y. Comp. Codes R. & Regs. tit. 7, § 701.6(g)(1)(ii)(2). In *Pacheco v. Drown*, 9:06-CV-20 (GTS/GHL), 2010 WL 144400, at *19 & n.21 (N.D.N.Y. Jan. 11, 2010), U.S. District Judge Glenn Suddaby held that the failure by the IGRC or the Superintendent to timely respond to a grievance or first level appeal may be appealed to the next level(s), including the CORC, in order to properly complete the grievance process. *Accord, Murray v. Palmer*, 9:03-CV-1010 (GTS/GHL), 2010 WL 1235591, *2 & nn. 4, 6 (N.D.N.Y. Mar. 31, 2010).

additional documents acknowledging receipt of this “appeal.” Copies of a further “appeal” addressed to the Director of the IGP in Albany and an IGP supervisor, part of which is dated “6-26-11” and part of which was dated 8-26-11,” were also appended to the complaint (Dkt. No. 1 at 14-17), along with the “Affidavit of Service” notarized on July 14, 2011 (Dkt. No. 1 at 18). Plaintiff submitted, with his response to the summary judgment motion, a letter dated September 6, 2011, from the offices of the Director of IGP in Albany (Karen Bellamy), acknowledging receipt of correspondence from plaintiff dated July 14, 2011. (Dkt. No. 52-11 at 13). As noted earlier, plaintiff’s “Affidavit of Service” notarized on July 14th has receipt stamps indicating that DOCCS received a copy of it on September 1, 2011. The letter from Karen Bellamy’s office returns plaintiff’s correspondence, advising him that “you must submit your grievance or appeal directly to IGRC at the facility.” (Dkt. No. 52-11 at 13).

Plaintiff’s response to the summary judgment motion also attaches a memorandum from the IGP Supervisor at Upstate dated September 14, 2011, acknowledging receipt of “complaints/letters of appeal . . . with written dates of 6/26/2011 and 7/27/2011.” (Dkt. No. 52-11 at 21). As noted above, one of plaintiff’s alleged grievance appeals is dated June 26, 2011; there does not appear to be any submission from plaintiff dated July 27, 2011 in the record. The letter from Upstate, where plaintiff was confined at the time, returned plaintiff’s documents as “untimely” because they related to alleged occurrences on “6/14/11 [and] 6/15/11”—the dates of the incident with defendant Rock at Clinton. (*Id.*). The Upstate IGP Supervisor relied on the regulations summarized in note 12 above, which require an initial complaint to

be filed within 21 days of the alleged occurrence unless an extension request is made within 45 days of the occurrence and is granted by the IGP supervisor. (*Id.*).

While the documentation with respect to plaintiff's alleged "appeals" is far from conclusive, it supports his claim that, when he received no response to his purported initial grievance, he properly mailed an "appeal" to the Superintendent of the facility where the grievance was allegedly ignored.¹⁴ When his appeal to the Superintendent was also allegedly ignored, plaintiff attempted to file an appeal with CORC by sending it to the Director of IGP in Albany. When the Director's Office advised plaintiff that his complaint or appeal needed to be filed with the IGRC at the facility where he was confined, plaintiff apparently did so. However, the IGP supervisor at Upstate treated his submission as an original complaint—not an appeal that should be forwarded to CORC—and found that it was untimely based on the deadlines applicable to initial complaints.

While the applicable regulations set time limits for filing appeals based on receipt of the written decision at an earlier stage, they do not set definitive deadlines for filing appeals when no response is ever received. See N.Y. Comp. Codes R. & Regs. tit. 7, §§ 701.5(c)(1) (an appeal to the Superintendent must be filed within seven calendar days **after the receipt of the IGRC's written response**) (emphasis added);

¹⁴ N.Y. Comp. Codes R. & Regs. tit. 7, §§ 701.6(h)(2) provides:
An inmate transferred to another facility may continue an appeal of any grievance. If the grievant wishes to appeal, **he or she must mail the signed appeal form back to the IGP supervisor at the facility where the grievance was originally filed** within seven calendar days after receipt. The IGP supervisor will refer it to the facility grievance clerk for processing.
(emphasis supplied).

701.5(d)(1)(I) (an appeal to CORC must be submitted, through the grievance clerk, **“within seven calendar days after receipt of the superintendent’s written response”**) (emphasis added); 701.6(h)(2) (quoted in note 14 above). Plaintiff’s “appeals” could not, as a matter of law, be deemed untimely; or at least, the uncertainty with respect to the deadlines might excuse a late appeal under the *Hemphill* standards.¹⁵ The court concludes that there are issues of fact that are material to the question of whether plaintiff properly pursued the administrative appeals necessary to exhaust his claims with respect to defendant Rock.

The various documents filed by plaintiff do not reflect that he made any written complaints about retaliation in connection with the adjudication of his disciplinary

¹⁵ Absent an extension, which would require the written consent of the grievant, N.Y. Comp. Codes R. & Regs. tit. 7, §§ 701.6(g)(1)(b)(ii)(2), the IGRC is required, during the first step of the grievance process, to schedule a hearing within 16 calendar days after receipt of the grievance. N.Y. Comp. Codes R. & Regs. tit. 7, §§ 701.5(b)(2)(ii). At the second step of the process, the Superintendent is supposed to render a decision within 20 calendar days from the receipt of an appeal. N.Y. Comp. Codes R. & Regs. tit. 7, §§ 701.5(c)(3)(I), (ii). Arguably, if an inmate has not consented to an extension and the IGRC has not scheduled a hearing within 16 days, or a superintendent has not rendered a decision within 20 days, the inmate would then have only seven days to appeal to the next level, unless he requested an extension supported by mitigating circumstances. *See, e.g., Goodson v. Silver*, 2012 WL 4449937, at *6 (discussing how to calculate the deadline for filing an appeal to CORC in a case where the Superintendent failed to respond to a harassment grievance). However, a number of contingencies, other than an inmate-approved extension, could alter such deadlines. In this case, the plaintiff was transferred from Clinton less than 16 days after the “occurrence” which was the subject of the alleged grievance. When an inmate’s confinement status precludes his timely appearance at an IGRC hearing, an unspecified delay in the resolution of the first stage of the grievance process is contemplated—to determine whether the inmate wants to postpone his hearing or have it proceed in his absence. N.Y. Comp. Codes R. & Regs. tit. 7, §§ 701.5(b)(2)(ii)(a). If a grievance against a DOCCS employee is determined by a superintendent to be a “harassment” grievance, the process and the deadlines change. *See* N.Y. Comp. Codes R. & Regs. tit. 7, §§ 701.8. Given the uncertainty of the deadlines for filing appeals when an inmate, particularly one who is transferred to another facility, receives no response to a grievance, this court cannot conclude, in the context of a summary judgment motion, that plaintiff’s appeals were untimely for exhaustion purposes or that any untimeliness should not be excused under *Hemphill* and its progeny.

charges at Clinton by defendant Chase, or his transfer to Coxsackie, for which plaintiff blames defendant LaValley, until his submission to IGP in Albany—part of which was dated “6-26-11” and part of which was dated “8-26-2011.” (Dkt. No. 52-11 at 17-20). It is clear that the portion of the submission dated June 26th is backdated because it purports to be an appeal of the grievance plaintiff states that he filed on approximately the same date and it references events, including plaintiff’s misconduct charge at Coxsackie on July 7, 2013 (Paquette-Monthie Decl. ¶¶ 6-7, 11-12), which occurred well after June 26th. As noted above, the documents submitted by plaintiff indicate that his submission was not received in the office of the IGP Director in Albany until early September 2011. The court concludes that no reasonable fact finder could conclude that plaintiff filed an initial grievance with respect to the conduct of defendants Chase and LaValley until August 26, 2011, which is considerably longer than 21 or 45 days after the relevant “occurrences”—the adjudication of the misbehavior report at Clinton on June 22, 2011 (Chase Decl. ¶ 5) or plaintiff’s transfer out of Clinton, which occurred on or about June 24, 2011 (LaValley Decl. ¶ 7 & Ex. B). Accordingly, the court concludes that these claims against defendants Carr and LaValley may be dismissed, on summary judgment, because of plaintiff’s failure to exhaust his administrative remedies by filing a timely initial grievance.

III. Eighth Amendment Claims

Plaintiff alleges that defendant Rock violated his Eighth Amendment rights in two ways on June 15, 2011, by inflicting cruel and unusual punishment when she hit

him in the head with the bathroom door, and by refusing to allow him to get immediate medical treatment for his purported injuries. As discussed above, C.O. Rock denies that she opened the bathroom door or caused it to hit plaintiff in the head, and she alleges that plaintiff did not request medical care or appear to require it. Plaintiff was seen, at his request, two days later by the Clinton medical staff, who found no evidence of bruising or swelling on plaintiff's head and treated him with Ibuprofen and a bag of ice.

Notwithstanding these factual disputes, the court concludes that, even accepting plaintiff's version of the relevant events, no reasonable fact finder could conclude that his Eighth Amendment rights were violated by defendant Rock. Accordingly, for the following reasons, this court recommends dismissal of those claims.

A. Excessive Force

1. Applicable Law

Inmates enjoy Eighth Amendment protection against the use of excessive force, and may recover damages under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 for a violation of those rights. *Hudson v. McMillian*, 503 U.S. 1, 9-10 (1992). The Eighth Amendment's prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment precludes the "unnecessary and wanton infliction of pain." *Gregg v. Georgia*, 428 U.S. 153, 173 (1976); *Sims v. Artuz*, 230 F.3d 14, 20 (2d Cir. 2000). To sustain a claim of excessive force under the Eighth Amendment, a plaintiff must establish both objective and subjective elements. *Blyden v. Mancusi*, 186 F.3d 252, 262 (2d Cir. 1999).

In order to satisfy the objective element of the constitutional standard for

excessive force, the defendants' conduct must be “inconsistent with the contemporary standards of decency.” *Whitely v. Albers*, 475 U.S. 312, 327 (1986) (citation omitted); *Hudson*, 503 U.S. at 9. “[T]he malicious use of force to cause harm constitute[s][an] Eighth Amendment violation per se[,]” regardless of the seriousness of the injuries. *Blyden*, 186 F.3d at 263 (citing *Hudson*, 503 U.S. at 9). “The Eighth Amendment's prohibition of ‘cruel and unusual’ punishments necessarily excludes from constitutional recognition *de minimis* uses of physical force, provided that the use of force is not of a sort repugnant to the conscience of mankind.” *Hudson*, 503 U.S. at 9-10 (citations omitted). “Not every push or shove, even if it may later seem unnecessary in the peace of a judge’s chambers, violates a prisoner’s constitutional rights.” *Sims*, 230 F.3d at 22 (citation omitted).

The subjective element requires a plaintiff to demonstrate the “necessary level of culpability, shown by actions characterized by wantonness.” *Id.* at 21 (citation omitted). The wantonness inquiry “turns on ‘whether force was applied in a good-faith effort to maintain or restore discipline, or maliciously and sadistically to cause harm.’” *Id.* (quoting *Hudson*, 503 U.S. at 7). In determining whether defendants acted in a malicious or wanton manner, the Second Circuit has identified five factors to consider: the extent of the injury and the mental state of the defendant; the need for the application of force; the correlation between that need and the amount of force used; the threat reasonably perceived by the defendants; and any efforts made by the defendants to temper the severity of a forceful response.” *Scott v. Coughlin*, 344 F.3d 282, 291 (2d Cir. 2003).

2. Analysis

In connection with defendants' summary judgment motion, plaintiff and C.O. Rock present very different versions of the events of June 15th. Plaintiff alleges that, on the day before the incident, C.O. Rock threatened to "put her size 7 shoe up my Muslim ass." (Compl., Dkt. No. 1 at 5; Pl.'s Reply to Rock Decl. ¶ 7, Dkt. No. 52-6). Defendant Rock denies ever threatening plaintiff. (Rock Decl. ¶ 13). Defendant Rock alleges that, on June 15th, plaintiff had been in the bathroom for approximately 15 minutes, and that other inmates needed to use the bathroom. (Rock Decl. ¶ 6). Plaintiff states that he obtained permission from C.O. Rock to use the bathroom and had been in the room for only five minutes. (Pl.'s Reply to Rock Decl. ¶ 9). Plaintiff claims that C.O. Rock "bust open" the door to the single male bathroom in the mess hall, hitting him extremely hard in the forehead. (Compl., Dkt. No. 1 at 5; Pl.'s Reply to Rock Decl. ¶ 7). C.O. Rock states that she knocked on the door and directed plaintiff to come out; she denies that she opened the door or hit plaintiff with the door. (Rock Decl. ¶¶ 6, 8-9).

In support of defendants' initial Rule 12(b)(6) motion, counsel contended that plaintiff's allegations regarding the June 15, 2011 incident in the Clinton mess hall established, at worst, that defendant Rock was negligent in causing a bathroom door to strike plaintiff in the head. (Defs.' Mem. in Support of Rule 12(b)(6) Mot. at 13, Dkt. No. 31-4). A correction officer who negligently causes an unintended injury to an inmate has not engaged in the type of wanton or malicious conduct necessary to support an Eighth Amendment excessive force claim. (*Id.*, citing *Daniels v. Williams*,

474 U.S. 327 (1986) (a state official's negligent act causing unintended loss of or injury to life, liberty, or property does not support a Section 1983 claim)). *See also Epps v. City of Schenectady*, 1:10-CV-1101 (MAD/CFH), 2013 WL 717915, at *6 (N.D.N.Y. Feb. 27, 2013) (negligence cannot be a basis for liability for constitutional torts); *Cicio v. Graham*, 9:08-CV-534 (NAM/DEP), 2010 WL 980272, at *13 (N.D.N.Y. Mar. 15, 2010) (citing *Schultz v. Amick*, 955 F. Supp. 1087, 1096 (N.D. Iowa 1997) (liability in a § 1983 excessive force action cannot be founded on mere negligence) (collecting cases)).

The court concludes that, even under plaintiff's version of the relevant events, a reasonable fact finder could not conclude that defendant Rock used force against plaintiff maliciously and sadistically, to cause harm. Whether plaintiff was in the bathroom for five minutes or 15 minutes, C.O. Rock had a good-faith penological basis to investigate why plaintiff had stayed in the bathroom long enough to deny access to other inmates who needed to use the facilities. Because plaintiff was on the other side of the bathroom door, defendant Rock could not have known that he was positioned in such a way that the door would hurt plaintiff if she opened it forcefully. While "busting open" the door may have created some risk that the person inside might be hit by the door, this is, at most, negligence that clearly does not rise to the level of wanton or malicious conduct. *See, e.g., White v. Drake*, 9:10-CV-1034 (GTS/DRH), 2011 WL 4478921, at *1, 9 (N.D.N.Y. Sept. 26, 2011) (the allegation that defendant kicked plaintiff's cell door from the outside while plaintiff was inside his cell, causing injury to plaintiff nose and jaw, are insufficient to establish an

intentional or malicious effort to injure plaintiff, as necessary to state an excessive force claim under the Eighth Amendment); *Bilan v. Davis*, 11 Civ. 5509, 2013 WL 3940562, at *6 (S.D.N.Y. July 31, 2013) (an officer struck plaintiff only after the conflict between the officers and a non-party inmate spilled over to where plaintiff was standing; in the absence of allegations that the force used against him was intentional and wanton, plaintiff's excessive force claim must fail) (Rept. & Recommendation), *adopted*, 2013 WL 4455408 (S.D.N.Y. Aug 20, 2013).

B. Denial of Medical Care

1. Applicable Law

In order to state an Eighth Amendment claim based on constitutionally inadequate medical treatment, the plaintiff must allege “acts or omissions sufficiently harmful to evidence deliberate indifference to serious medical needs.” *Estelle v. Gamble*, 429 U.S. 97, 106 (1976). There are two elements to the deliberate indifference standard. *Smith v. Carpenter*, 316 F.3d 178, 183–84 (2d Cir. 2003). The first element is objective and measures the severity of the deprivation, while the second element is subjective and ensures that the defendant acted with a sufficiently culpable state of mind. *Id.* at 184 (citing, *inter alia*, *Chance v. Armstrong*, 143 F.3d 698, 702 (2d Cir. 1998)).

The objective prong of the standard is satisfied “when (a) the prisoner was ‘actually deprived of adequate medical care,’ meaning prison officials acted unreasonably in response to an inmate health risk under the circumstances, and (b) ‘the inadequacy in medical care is sufficiently serious.’” *Bellotto v. County of Orange*,

248 F. App'x 232, 236 (2d Cir. 2007) (quoting *Salahuddin v. Goord*, 467 F.3d 263, 279-80 (2d Cir. 2006)). If the “unreasonable care” consists of a failure to provide any treatment, then the court examines whether the inmate’s condition itself is “sufficiently serious.” *Smith v. Carpenter*, 316 F.3d 178, 185-86 (2d Cir. 2003). When a prisoner alleges “a temporary delay or interruption in the provision of otherwise adequate medical treatment,” the court must focus on the seriousness of the particular risk of harm that resulted from the challenged delay or interruption, rather than the prisoner’s underlying medical condition alone.” *Id.* at 185. The standard for determining when a deprivation or delay in a prisoner’s medical need is sufficiently serious contemplates a condition of urgency that may result in degeneration of the patient’s condition or extreme pain. *Bellotto v. County of Orange*, 248 F. App'x at 236 (citing, *inter alia*, *Chance v. Armstrong*, 143 F.3d at 702).

The subjective prong of the deliberate indifference test is satisfied when an official “knows that inmates face a substantial risk of serious harm and disregards that risk by failing to take reasonable measures to abate it.” *Farmer v. Brennan*, 511 U.S. 825, 847 (1994). A plaintiff is not required to show that a defendant acted or failed to act “for the very purpose of causing harm or with knowledge that harm will result,” but must show that the official was aware of facts from which one could infer that “a substantial risk of serious harm” exists, and that the official drew that inference. *Id.* at 835, 837. The defendant must be subjectively aware that his or her conduct creates the risk; however, the defendant may introduce proof that he or she knew the underlying facts, but believed that the risk to which the facts gave rise was

“insubstantial or non-existent.” *Farmer v. Brennan*, 511 U.S. at 844. Thus, the court stated in *Salahuddin* that the defendant’s belief that his conduct posed no risk of serious harm “need not be sound so long as it is sincere,” and “even if objectively unreasonable, a defendant’s mental state may be nonculpable.” *Salahuddin v. Goord*, 467 F.3d at 281.

A difference of opinion between a prisoner and prison officials regarding medical treatment does not, as a matter of law, constitute deliberate indifference. *Chance v. Armstrong*, 143 F.3d at 703. Nor does the fact that an inmate feels that he did not get the level of medical attention he deserved, or that he might prefer an alternative treatment, support a constitutional claim. *Sonds v. St. Barnabas Hosp. Correctional Health Services*, 151 F. Supp. 2d 303, 311 (S.D.N.Y. 2001) (citing *Dean v. Coughlin*, 804 F.2d 207, 215 (2d Cir. 1986)). Even negligence in diagnosing or treating an inmate’s medical condition does not constitute deliberate indifference. *Farmer v. Brennan*, 511 U.S. at 835. Thus, any claims of medical malpractice, or disagreement with treatment are not actionable under Section 1983. *Ross v. Kelly*, 784 F. Supp. 35, 44-45 (W.D.N.Y.), *aff’d*, 970 F.2d 896 (2d Cir. 1992) (table).

2. Analysis

While plaintiff claims that defendant Rock violated his Eighth Amendment rights by failing to allow him to obtain immediate medical care after the incident on June 15th, he acknowledges that he was seen by the prison medical staff two days later.

(Compl., Dkt. No. 1 at 5).¹⁶ In connection with defendants' initial Rule 12(b)(6) motion, counsel argued, *inter alia*, that plaintiff failed to allege that the brief delay in his treatment caused any significant harm to him, thus failing to satisfy the objective prong of the deliberate indifference standard. (Mem. in Support of Rule 12(b)(6) Mot. at 22-23). It is clear from the parties' submissions relating to defendants' summary judgment motion that C.O. Rock and plaintiff disagree as to whether he requested and/or required medical attention on June 15th. However, no reasonable fact finder could conclude, based on the irrefutable facts, that the brief delay in plaintiff's treatment significantly increased the risk of serious adverse health consequences to him, as required to establish a deliberate indifference claim.

Evans v. Manos cogently summarizes how a prison inmate's claim for a delay in medical treatment should be evaluated under the Eighth Amendment:

“Although a delay in medical care can demonstrate deliberate indifference to a prisoner's medical needs, a prisoner's Eighth Amendment rights are violated only where ‘the delay reflects deliberate indifference to a serious risk of health or safety, to a life-threatening or fast-degenerating condition or to some other condition of extreme pain that might be alleviated through reasonably prompt treatment.’”

¹⁶ In support of the summary judgment motion, defendants document that plaintiff could have sought and obtained medical attention prior to June 17th by taking advantage of sick call procedures from his cell. (Devlin-Varin Decl., Dkt. No. 42-10). Plaintiff responded, in conclusory fashion, that prior efforts to get medical attention were thwarted by the Clinton staff. (Pl.'s Reply to Devlin-Varin Decl. ¶¶ 5, 6, Dkt. No. 52-5; Pl.'s Reply to Michalek Decl. ¶ 4, Dkt. No. 52-4). In any event, because plaintiff could seek prompt, necessary medical treatment once he returned to his cell, C.O. Rock would not have been subjectively aware that her failure to send plaintiff for immediate medical attention would subject him to a risk of serious harm from a prolonged delay in care, even if she had known that the bathroom door had struck plaintiff in the head. *Farmer v. Brennan*, 511 U.S. at 844; *Salahuddin v. Goord*, 467 F.3d at 281. Thus, no reasonable fact finder would conclude that plaintiff could establish the subjective prong of the deliberate indifference standard.

Evans v. Manos, 336 F. Supp. 2d 255, 262 (W.D.N.Y. 2004) (citations omitted). The Second Circuit has not resolved whether actual adverse medical effects are required, as a threshold matter, to state a viable Eighth Amendment claim relating to delayed medical care; but has indicated that a plaintiff must at least show that the delay significantly increased the risk for medical injury or similar serious adverse consequences. *Smith v. Carpenter*, 316 F.3d at 188-89, n.14, n.15. The Court in *Smith* also observed, in the post-trial context, that, “although demonstrable adverse medical effects may not be required under the Eighth Amendment, the absence of present physical injury will often be probative in assessing the risk of future harm.” *Smith v. Carpenter*, 316 F.3d at 188.

As noted, when plaintiff was examined by the Clinton medical staff on June 17th, they observed no visible bump, swelling, or bruising on his head, and he was treated with only Ibuprofen and a bag of ice. (Michalek Decl. ¶ 5; 6/17/11 Ambulatory Health Record (“AHR”), Dkt. No. 43 at 4). Plaintiff claims he did have a visible bruise and swelling, which is why the medical staff gave him ice. (Pl.’s Reply to Michalek Decl. ¶ 5). Subsequent medical records document only a few complaints by plaintiff of the lingering headaches, dizziness, shaking, and smelling odors, which he attributed to the blow to the head he allegedly received at Clinton on June 15, 2011. (Michalek Decl. ¶¶ 6, 11; 7/18/11 AHR, Dkt. No. 43 at 6; 8/16/11 AHR, Dkt. No. 43 at 9). The medical staff found no follow-up treatment was necessary with respect to his complaints about a head injury, other than dispensing Tylenol to plaintiff on

August 16, 2011. (*Id.*).

Plaintiff apparently contests the accuracy of subsequent medical records at several DOCCS facilities, which reflect no evidence of any significant long-term effects of the alleged incident on June 15th, claiming that “he has expressed to medical staff in each facility of all the ongoing pain and suffering he has been force [sic] to live with due to all of the injuries he sustained from past and present incident. . . .” (Pl.’s Reply to Michalek Decl. ¶ 6).¹⁷ He also challenges the quality of his medical care after leaving Clinton.¹⁸ As noted above, differences of opinion between a prisoner and prison officials regarding appropriate medical treatment do not, as a matter of law, constitute deliberate indifference. Moreover, Plaintiff’s conclusory claims of serious ongoing health problems that he attributes to the June 15th incident at Clinton do not create an issue of fact in the face of the overwhelming documentary medical evidence to the contrary.¹⁹

In any event, plaintiff still has offered no evidence to rebut defendants’ well-

¹⁷ Plaintiff has also filed copies of sick call requests that he purportedly submitted in August and September 2011, complaining of ongoing symptoms relating to the alleged blow to his head on June 15, 2011 at Clinton and a 2009 assault in Sing Sing. (Dkt. No. 52-11 at 45-51).

¹⁸ Plaintiff has filed documents relating to complaints and grievances regarding his medical care between September and November 2011. (Dkt. No. 52-11 at 52-54).

¹⁹ *See also Brown v. White*, 9:08-CV-200, 2010 WL 985184, at *8 (N.D.N.Y. Mar. 15, 2010) (plaintiff’s conclusory suggestion that defendant nurse completely refused to provide any medical attention on a particular date is insufficient to create a dispute of fact in the face of the sworn declaration and supporting documentary evidence in the record); *Benitez v. Pecenco*, 92 Civ. 7670, 1995 WL 444352 at n.5, (S.D.N.Y. July 27, 1995) (conclusory claim that plaintiff was never issued medication was directly contradicted by medical records and was insufficient to create a factual dispute on that issue) (citing *Flaherty v. Coughlin*, 713 F.2d 10, 13 (2d Cir. 1983) (“mere conclusory allegations or denials are insufficient to withstand a motion for summary judgment once the moving party has set forth a documentary case”)).

documented position that the two-day delay before plaintiff saw the medical staff at Clinton about his very subjective and relatively minor medical complaints did not involve a significant risk of degeneration of his medical condition or require him to endure extreme pain. *Bellotto v. County of Orange*, 248 F. App'x at 236. Thus, the court concludes that no reasonable fact finder could conclude that plaintiff can establish the objective element of a deliberate indifference claim. *See, e.g., Vansertima v. Department of Corrections*, 10 CV 3214, 2012 WL 4503412, at *2, 6 (E.D.N.Y. Sept. 28, 2012) (plaintiff allegedly suffered a nose bleed and an injury to his head “causing sever[e] pain” as a result of hitting his face on the seat in front of him when the prison bus in which he was riding stopped suddenly; given that plaintiff was seen by the medical staff within one or two days after the incident and his subsequent complaints involved relatively infrequent nose bleeds and intermittent headaches, plaintiff cannot show any “adverse medical effects or demonstrable physical injury” that resulted from what was in any case—at most—a two delay in treatment).²⁰

IV. Retaliation

Plaintiff's theory is that, in response to plaintiff's complaint against defendant

²⁰ *See also Brown v. White*, 2010 WL 985184, at *9–10 (inmate who suffered from chronic, but not acute, lower back pain and occasional headaches and dizziness during a three-month delay in requested medication and other treatment did not suffer a serious deprivation of medical care); *Evans v. Manos*, 336 F. Supp. 2d at 260 (W.D.N.Y. 2004) (subjective claims of pain, unaccompanied by substantial medical complications are not sufficient to create a factual issue as to whether he was suffering from a “serious,” unmet medical need); *Hanrahan v. Menon*, 9:07-CV-610 (FJS/ATB), 2010 WL 6427650, at *8-9 (N.D.N.Y. Dec. 15, 2010) (plaintiff's complaints of primarily subjective mental health symptoms do not rise to the level that would make the two-month delay in plaintiff's medication a serious deprivation) (Report- Recommendation), *adopted*, 2011 WL 1213171 (N.D.N.Y. Mar. 31, 2011), *aff'd*, 470 F. App'x 32 (2d Cir. May 18, 2012).

Rock for hitting plaintiff with a bathroom door and then denying him medical care, five DOCCS employees from two separate and geographically distant prisons conspired to retaliate against him in various ways. This court recommends the dismissal of plaintiff's retaliation/conspiracy claims against each defendant, based on the lack of a causal connection between plaintiff's protected conduct and any "adverse action" taken against him, the absence of "personal involvement," and/or, as previously discussed, plaintiff's failure to exhaust his administrative remedies.

A. Applicable Law

1. Retaliation

In order to establish a claim of retaliation for the exercise of a First Amendment right, plaintiff must show that he engaged in constitutionally protected speech or conduct, and that the protected activity was a substantial motivating factor for "adverse action" taken against him by defendants. *Bennett v. Goord*, 343 F.3d 133, 137 (2d Cir. 2003) (citing *Gayle v. Gonyea*, 313 F.3d 677 (2d Cir. 2002); *see also Hendricks v. Coughlin*, 114 F.3d 390 (2d Cir. 1997)). The Second Circuit has defined "adverse action" in the prison context as "retaliatory conduct 'that would deter a similarly situated individual of ordinary firmness from exercising . . . constitutional rights.'" *Gill v. Pidlypchak*, 389 F.3d at 381 (citation omitted). This objective test applies whether or not the plaintiff was himself subjectively deterred from exercising his rights. *Id.*

To establish retaliation, the plaintiff must also establish a causal connection between the protected speech or conduct and the adverse action. *Gill v. Pidlypchak*,

389 F.3d 379, 380 (2d Cir. 2004). Although a “‘plaintiff can establish a causal connection that suggests retaliation by showing that protected activity was close in time to the adverse action[,]’ “[s]uch circumstantial evidence of retaliation, . . . without more, is insufficient to survive summary judgment.” *Roseboro v. Gillespie*, 791 F. Supp. 2d 353, 370 (S.D.N.Y. 2011) (citations omitted).

Even if plaintiff makes the appropriate showing of retaliation, defendants may avoid liability if they demonstrate that they would have taken the adverse action even in the absence of the protected conduct. *Id.* at 371. “Regardless of the presence of retaliatory motive, . . . a defendant may be entitled to summary judgment if he can show . . . that even without the improper motivation the alleged retaliatory action would have occurred.” *Scott v. Coughlin*, 344 F.3d 282, 287-88 (2d Cir. 2003) (citing *Mt. Healthy City Sch. Dist. Bd. of Educ. v. Doyle*, 429 U.S. 274, 287 (1977)).

The court must keep in mind that claims of retaliation are “easily fabricated” and “pose a substantial risk of unwarranted judicial intrusion into matters of general prison administration.” Accordingly, plaintiff must set forth non-conclusory allegations to sustain a retaliation claim.²¹ *Bennett*, 343 F.3d at 137. Even where a

²¹ Conclusory allegations, lacking any factual foundation, are also insufficient to support a claimed conspiracy to violate another’s civil rights. *See, e.g., Jackson v. County of Rockland*, 450 F. App’x 15, 19 (2d Cir. 2011) (citing *Gallop v. Cheney*, 642 F.3d 364, 369 (2d Cir. 2011) (finding allegations of conspiracy “baseless” where the plaintiff “offer[ed] not a single fact to corroborate her allegation of a ‘meeting of the minds’ among the conspirators”)); *Ciambriello v. County of Nassau*, 292 F.3d 307, 325 (2d Cir. 2002). Plaintiffs alleging a civil rights conspiracy must “make an effort to provide some details of time and place and the alleged effects of the conspiracy . . . [including] facts to demonstrate that the defendants entered into an agreement, express or tacit, to achieve the unlawful end.” *Warren v. Fischl*, 33 F. Supp. 2d 171, 177 (E.D.N.Y. 1999) (citations omitted).

complaint or affidavit contains specific assertions, the allegations “may still be deemed conclusory if [they are] (1) ‘largely unsubstantiated by any other direct evidence’ and (2) ‘so replete with inconsistencies and improbabilities that no reasonable juror would undertake the suspension of disbelief necessary to credit the allegations made in the complaint.’” *Smith v. Woods*, 9:03-CV-480 (DNH/GHL), 2006 WL 1133247, at *3 & n.11 (N.D.N.Y. Apr. 24, 2006) (quoting *Jeffreys v. City of New York*, 426 F.3d 549, 554-55 (2d Cir. 2005)). To be sufficient to create a “factual issue,” in the context of a summary judgment motion, an allegation in an affidavit or verified complaint “must, among other things, be based ‘on personal knowledge.’” *Id.*, 2006 WL 1133247, at *3 & n.7 (collecting cases); Fed. R. Civ. P. 56(c)(4).

A prison inmate has no constitutionally-guaranteed immunity from being falsely or wrongly accused of conduct which may result in the deprivation of a protected liberty interest, as long as the prisoner is provided with procedural due process. *Freeman v. Rideout*, 808 F.2d 949, 951 (2d Cir. 1986). However, if a defendant initiated disciplinary proceedings against plaintiff in retaliation for his exercise of a constitutionally protected right, substantive due process rights may be implicated even if the plaintiff did receive full procedural due process. *Franco v. Kelly*, 854 F.2d 584, 588-90 (2d Cir. 1988). Any adverse action taken by defendant in retaliation for the exercise of a constitutional right, even if not unconstitutional in itself, states a viable constitutional claim. *Id.*

2. Personal Involvement

For retaliation claims, as for other section 1983 claims, a plaintiff “must show

some tangible connection between the constitutional violation alleged and [a] particular defendant.” *Toole v. Connell*, 9:04-CV-724 (LEK/DEP), 2008 WL 4186334, at *6 (N.D.N.Y. Sept. 10, 2008). Personal involvement is a prerequisite to the assessment of damages in a section 1983 case, and *respondeat superior* is an inappropriate theory of liability. *Wright v. Smith*, 21 F.3d 496, 501 (2d Cir. 1994) (citation omitted); *Richardson v. Goord*, 347 F.3d 431, 435 (2d Cir. 2003).

In *Williams v. Smith*, 781 F.2d 319, 323-24 (2d Cir. 1986), the Second Circuit detailed the various ways in which a defendant can be personally involved in a constitutional deprivation, and thus be subject to individual liability. A supervisory official is personally involved if the supervisor directly participated in the infraction. *Id.* The defendant may have been personally involved if, after learning of a violation through a report or appeal, he or she failed to remedy the wrong. *Id.* Personal involvement may also exist if the official created a policy or custom under which unconstitutional practices occurred, or allowed such a policy or custom to continue. *Id.* Finally, a supervisory official may be personally involved if he or she were grossly negligent in managing subordinates who caused the unlawful condition. *Id.* See also *Iqbal v. Hasty*, 490 F.3d 143, 152-53 (2d Cir. 2007) (citing *Colon v. Coughlin*, 58 F.3d 865, 873) (2d Cir. 1995)), *rev’d on other grounds*, 556 U.S. 662 (2009).

B. Analysis

Defense counsel argues that the retaliation claims should be dismissed because there was no causal connection between plaintiff’s protected conduct and the alleged adverse actions against him, and because some defendants were not personally

involved in any adverse action against plaintiff. Those arguments require a close examination of the record regarding each defendant. *Toole v. Connell*, 2008 WL 4186334, at *6 (analysis of retaliation claims requires careful, case-specific, consideration of the protected activity in which the inmate plaintiff has engaged, the adverse action taken against him or her, and the evidence tending to link the two).

1. Defendant Rock

To the extent plaintiff alleges that defendant Rock retaliated against him by filing a false misbehavior report because he submitted a complaint to Supt. LaValley about the June 15, 2011 incident in the Clinton mess hall, plaintiff clearly cannot establish the required causal connection between his protected conduct and C.O. Rock's alleged adverse action. Plaintiff's initial complaint to Supt. LaValley (Dkt. No. 52-11 at 5), explicitly refers to the misbehavior report written by defendant Rock, and so was clearly written after the correction officer made clear to plaintiff that she intended to initiate disciplinary action against him. The letter which purportedly confirms that Supt. LaValley's office received plaintiff's letter of complaint states that the communication was not received until June 17, 2011 (Dkt. No. 52-11 at 4), after plaintiff was served with the misbehavior report, on June 16th at 7:00 a.m. (Dkt. No. 36 at 67). Clearly, plaintiff's complaint to the Superintendent about C.O. Rock could not have been "a substantial or motivating factor" that caused her to issue the misbehavior report, as would be necessary to support a retaliation claim. *Bennett v. Goord*, 343 F.3d at 137.

Plaintiff also alleges that, because of the complaint he wrote against defendant

Rock, she caused others to retaliate against him—defendant Chase, in connection with the June 22, 2011 adjudication of the disciplinary charges she filed at Clinton; Supt. LaValley, in connection with plaintiff’s transfer to Coxsackie on June 24th; defendant Paquette-Monthie, in connection with the misbehavior report she filed against plaintiff at Coxsackie on July 7, 2011; and defendant Gutwein, in connection with the adjudication of the disciplinary charges at Coxsackie later in July 2011. As discussed elsewhere herein, plaintiff’s retaliation claims with respect to the adjudication of the misbehavior report at Clinton (on which plaintiff was acquitted), and his transfer from Clinton (which plaintiff initiated), clearly lack merit and should also be dismissed because plaintiff did not exhaust his administrative remedies.

Plaintiff’s retaliation claim with respect to the misbehavior report at Coxsackie are also not viable. Although he did not make this allegation in his original complaint, plaintiff claimed, in response to the defendants’ initial Rule 12(b)(6) motion and their later summary judgment motion, that C.O. Rock bragged to him, on June 14, 2011, that she would not suffer any consequences if plaintiff ‘wr[o]te her up’ because she had “family” in Clinton and at DOCCS—presumably in the central office—in Albany. (Dkt. No. 36 at 29; Dkt. No. 52 at 6). However, plaintiff does not otherwise counter defendant Rock’s sworn declaration that she was not aware of any complaint plaintiff wrote about her conduct on June 15th, which plaintiff admits was never investigated by DOCCS (Dkt. No. 52-11 at 6, 19). (Rock Decl. ¶¶ 13-14). And, for the reasons set forth below, no reasonable fact finder could conclude that plaintiff can overcome C.O. Rock’s sworn statements that she did not know, or communicate with, defendant

Paquette-Monthie, or otherwise direct anyone at Coxsackie to pursue a false misbehavior report against plaintiff. (Rock Decl. ¶¶ 14-17).

2. Defendant Chase

As noted above, plaintiff failed to exhaust his administrative remedies with respect to any retaliation claims relating to Lt. Chase's adjudication of the disciplinary charges at Clinton or plaintiff's transfer from Clinton. In any event, defendant Chase's acquittal of defendant on the misbehavior report clearly is not an "adverse action" which could support a retaliation charge.

The complaint alleges that, when he could not "get" plaintiff at Clinton, C.O. Chase threatened to "get," *i.e.*, retaliate against, plaintiff at the next facility. In response to the defendants' Rule 12(b)(6) motion and/or the instant summary judgment motion, plaintiff attributed further damaging admissions to Lt. Chase: first, that he talked about the order of protection against plaintiff, which was the impetus for the later disciplinary charges at Coxsackie (Dkt. No. 36 at 30; Pl.'s Reply to Chase Decl. ¶¶ 6-7, 9-10, Dkt. No. 52-7); and second, that he threatened to block plaintiff's transfer to Coxsackie (Pl.'s Reply to Defs.' Rule 7.1(a)(3) Stmt. ¶ 113, Dkt. No. 52 at 9; Pl.'s Reply to Chase Decl. ¶ 12).

Plaintiff's claims about Lt. Chase's admissions, which became more self-serving from the time plaintiff filed the initial complaint to the times he was defending his complaint against substantive defense motions, are, in the court's view, inherently implausible. It seems unlikely that defendant Chase would retaliate against an inmate

based on a complaint against another officer in which he was not implicated.²² Lt. Chase acquitted plaintiff of disciplinary charges that he was smoking in the bathroom at Clinton because C.O. Rock did not actually see plaintiff smoking; she only smelled cigarette smoke on his person and in the room as he was leaving. (Chase Decl. ¶ 7; Dkt. No. 52-11 at 1-3). Given that the circumstantial evidence presented by C.O. Rock probably constituted “some” “reliable evidence” sufficient to uphold a conviction on a prison disciplinary charge,²³ it seems highly likely that defendant Chase would have convicted plaintiff had he truly wanted to retaliate against him for his complaints against defendant Rock. Moreover, if, as plaintiff suggests in response to the Rule 12(b)(6) motion, Lt. Chase knew about plaintiff’s violations of the order of protection and intended to extract revenge against plaintiff, he could have initiated additional disciplinary charges before plaintiff was transferred. If Lt. Chase had the power and the retaliatory motivation to block plaintiff’s transfer from Clinton to Cocksackie, then why did that transfer actually take place?

In his sworn declaration, Lt. Chase states that he never threatened plaintiff; he had no knowledge of any complaints by plaintiff against C.O. Rock; and he had no

²² See, e.g., *Hare v. Hayden*, 09 Civ. 3135, 2011 WL 1453789, at *4 (S.D.N.Y. Apr. 14, 2011) (“As a general matter, it is difficult to establish one defendant’s retaliation for complaints against another defendant.”) (citing *Wright v. Goord*, 554 F.3d 255, 274 (2d Cir. 2009) (dismissing retaliation claim against a corrections officer when only alleged basis for retaliation was complaint about an incident involving another corrections officer); *Roseboro v. Gillespie*, 791 F. Supp. 2d 353, 369 (S.D.N.Y. 2011) (plaintiff has failed to provide any basis to believe that a corrections counselor would retaliate for a grievance that she was not personally named in)).

²³ See *Sira v. Morton*, 380 F.3d 57, 69 (2d Cir. 2004) and other cases cited below with respect to the due process standards applying to disciplinary proceedings.

knowledge as to why or when plaintiff was to be transferred out of Clinton (where Lt. Chase worked). Defendant Chase further alleges that he did not personally know, or have any contact with defendant Paquette-Monthie; he never gave any direction to anyone else regarding a misbehavior report issued to plaintiff at Cocksackie; and he did not otherwise take any action to retaliate against plaintiff. (Chase Decl. ¶¶ 8-14).

The only support for plaintiff's allegation that Lt. Chase harbored a retaliatory motive because of plaintiff's complaints against C.O. Rock and played some role in the later filing of disciplinary charges against plaintiff in a different prison are the purported admissions which plaintiff attributes to defendant Chase. As noted, those supposed admissions are inherently implausible and have become increasingly elaborate and self serving as this case has progressed. Plaintiff's unsupported and highly improbable claims about Lt. Chase's admissions are not sufficient to overcome defendant Chase's sworn declaration, and no reasonable fact finder could conclude that he retaliated against the plaintiff. *See, e.g., Allah v. Greiner*, 03 Civ. 3789, 2006 WL 357824, at *1, 3, 5-6, 7, 9 (S.D.N.Y. Feb. 15, 2006) (prisoner's allegations that virtually all of the defendants made specific admissions that they retaliated against him, were implausible and discredited by the defendants' sworn affidavits, and therefore insufficient to create issue of fact with regard to all but one of prisoner's claims)²⁴; *Jeffreys v. City of New York*, 426 F.3d at 554 ("While it is undoubtedly the

²⁴ The district court in *Allah v. Greiner* found that plaintiff's allegations were sufficient to create issues of fact with regard to the prisoner's claim of retaliation against one defendant because the defendant (Totten) had a plausible motive to retaliate against the plaintiff for a grievance specifically naming Totten and because Totten's explanation for the allegedly retaliatory act was internally inconsistent and in conflict with other evidence. *Id.* at *4.

duty of district courts not to weigh the credibility of the parties at the summary judgment stage, in the rare circumstance where the plaintiff relies almost exclusively on his own testimony, much of which is contradictory and incomplete, it will be impossible for a district court to determine whether ‘the jury could reasonably find for the plaintiff,’ . . . and thus whether there are any “genuine” issues of material fact, without making some assessment of the plaintiff’s account.”) (citation omitted)).

3. Defendant LaValley

The complaint alleges that plaintiff sent Clinton Superintendent LaValley an initial complaint about defendant Rock; but that, rather than investigate, defendant LaValley worked with C.O. Rock and Lt. Chase to retaliate against plaintiff. Plaintiff also appears to allege that defendant LaValley caused him to be transferred to Cocksackie, where he would be subjected to further retaliation by Counselor Paquette-Monthie. (Dkt. No. 1 at 6). In response to the defendants’ summary judgment motion, plaintiff filed a letter apparently acknowledging receipt, by Supt. LaValley’s office, of plaintiff’s initial complaint, which, according to the letter, was “referred to Captain D. Holdridge for review and appropriate action.” (Dkt. No. 52-11 at 4).

As discussed above, plaintiff failed to administratively exhaust any retaliation claim involving the adjudication of the disciplinary charges at Clinton or his transfer from Clinton. Furthermore, plaintiff’s claims that defendants Rock and Chase retaliated against him in connection with the misbehavior report at Clinton are devoid of merit for the reasons set forth above. In any event, if defendant LaValley failed to follow up on plaintiff’s complaint about C.O. Rock or he delegated responsibility for

addressing the complaint to a subordinate, he would not have been “personally involved” in any violation of plaintiff’s rights by defendant Rock. *See, e.g., Smart v. Goord*, 441 F. Supp. 2d 631, 642-643 (S.D.N.Y. 2006) (the failure of a supervisory official to respond to a letter of complaint is insufficient to create personal responsibility); *Sealey v. Giltner*, 116 F.3d 47, 51 (2d Cir. 1997) (a supervisor’s referral of a prisoner’s letter of complaint to a subordinate for review, and a later response to the prisoners to advise him of the subordinate’s decision did not demonstrate the requisite personal involvement on the part of the supervisory prison official).

With respect to plaintiff’s transfer out of Clinton, plaintiff admittedly initiated the process by requesting an “area of preference” transfer. (LaValley Decl. ¶ 7 & Ex. A, Dkt. No. 42-5 at 2; Pl.’s Reply to Defs.’ Rule 7.1(a)(3) Stmt. ¶ 115). Plaintiff complains, however, that he should have been transferred from Clinton, in far Northern New York, to Sing Sing, near plaintiff’s family in Westchester County, rather than to Coxsackie, which is south of Albany—much closer to Westchester County than Clinton, but not as close as Sing Sing. (Pl.’s Reply to Defs.’ Rule 7.1(a)(3) Stmt. ¶¶ 115-16). While “prison authorities may not transfer an inmate in retaliation for the exercise of constitutionally protected rights[,]” “[a] prisoner has no liberty interest in remaining at a particular correctional facility” *Davis v. Kelly*, 160 F.3d 917, 920 (2d Cir. 1998). In any event, Supt. LaValley’s declaration states, and plaintiff has not rebutted, that he had no personal involvement in plaintiff’s transfer to Coxsackie, because transfers of prisoners from Clinton were overseen, in

the normal course of business, by the Deputy Superintendent for Programs. (LaValley Decl. ¶¶ 8-13; Pl.’s Reply to LaValley Decl., Dkt. No. 52-8).

Finally, to the extent the complaint suggests that defendant LaValley conspired with others at Coxsackie to retaliate against him, plaintiff provides no evidence whatsoever to counter Supt. LaValley’s declaration that he did not know Counselor Paquette-Monthie, and that he did nothing to retaliate against plaintiff in connection with the filing of disciplinary charges against him at that separate facility. (LaValley Decl. ¶¶ 13-15; Pl.’s Reply to LaValley Decl., Dkt. No. 52-8). Based on the authority cited above, it is clear that a claim of retaliation based on mere speculation by an inmate that a particular defendant was somehow involved in allegedly retaliatory action by others at a separate facility cannot survive summary judgment. In any event, as discussed below, plaintiff’s claims of retaliation against the Coxsackie defendants are subject to dismissal on other grounds.

4. Defendants Paquette-Monthie and Gutwein

Defendants’ initial Rule 12(b)(6) motion plaintiff’s retaliation claims against Counselor Paquette-Monthie and Hearing Officer Gutwein argued that plaintiff did not plead any specific facts to support his bald speculation that the Clinton defendants enlisted the Coxsackie defendants to pursue retaliatory disciplinary charges against him. (Defs.’ Mem. in Support of Rule 12(b)(6) Mot. at 12). Plaintiff responded to this motion with the self-serving claim that defendant Paquette-Monthie told him that she issued the misbehavior report against him because he “filed a complaint against

her friend at Clinton Annex.” (Dkt. No. 36 at 31, 37, 40).²⁵ During the July 2011 disciplinary hearing, plaintiff tried to cross-examine defendant Paquette-Monthie about her allegedly biased and vengeful motivation for filing the misbehavior report against him, and asked questions about statements she supposedly made during prior interviews of plaintiff; but, he never made any reference to the counselor’s alleged statement that she was initiated the charges because plaintiff had filed a complaint against a friend of hers. (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 15, 27, 28, 33-34, 38, 40, 42-43, Dkt. No. 42-15). Nor did plaintiff claim that Counselor Paquette-Monthie made this admission in the various complaints and grievance “appeals” he purportedly submitted in August 2011 (Dkt. No. 52-11 at 6, 17-20, 22-23, 27-28), or in his original complaint filed in this action in September 2011 (Dkt. No. 1).²⁶

In her sworn declaration, defendant Paquette-Monthie states that she did not personally know, and never had any contact with, defendants Rock and Chase at Clinton. She insists that she issued the misbehavior report against plaintiff, not to retaliate against him, but in good faith, based on the evidence. (Paquette-Monthie

²⁵ Plaintiff speculated that Counselor Paquette-Monthie previously worked in the sex offender program at Clinton Annex, and presumably met C.O. Rock while at Clinton. (Dkt. No. 36 at 36, 37).

²⁶ Plaintiff attached, to his response to the Rule 12(b)(6) motion, documents purportedly submitted in state court proceedings in October 2011, one of which referenced Counselor Paquette-Monthie’s alleged statement that she filed the misbehavior report against plaintiff because he filed a complaint against a friend of hers. (Dkt. No. 36 at 19). Even if this document is authentic and was not backdated, as some of plaintiff’s submissions clearly are, it is apparent from the record that plaintiff belatedly claimed that Counselor Paquette-Monthie made this admission in furtherance of self-serving legal tactics, well after the disciplinary hearing at Cocksackie and after plaintiff filed his complaint in this action.

Decl. ¶¶ 11-15). Defendant Gutwein similarly denies any effort to retaliate against plaintiff, and swears that he was not directed by anyone to find plaintiff guilty of the disciplinary charges against him at Cossackie. Hearing Officer Gutwein also states that he did not know C.O. Rock from Clinton, and was unaware of any complaint or grievance plaintiff may have filed against her. (Gutwein Decl. ¶¶ 24-33).

Based on the authority cited in note 22 above, it is unlikely that defendants Paquette-Monthie and Gutwein would be motivated to retaliate against plaintiff for a complaint or grievance in which they were not implicated, particularly when the target of the complaint worked at a separate and geographically distant correctional facility. The sworn declarations establishing that the Clinton and Cossackie defendants did not know each other or have any contact, utterly refute plaintiff's speculation that they colluded to initiate false disciplinary charges against him. The only support plaintiff offers for the implausible conspiracy theory underlying the retaliation claim against the Cossackie defendants is the alleged admission of Counselor Paquette-Monthie that she issued the misbehavior report because plaintiff had complained about a friend of hers at Clinton Annex. Given that plaintiff did not offer this self-serving alleged admission while confronting Counselor Paquette-Monthie at the disciplinary hearing, or in his grievance appeals which referenced the Cossackie defendants, or even in his initial complaint in this action, the court finds that the purported admission does not create an issue of fact that could lead any reasonable fact finder to conclude that defendants Paquette-Monthie and Gutwein conspired to retaliate against plaintiff. *See, e.g., Allah v. Greiner*, 2006 WL 357824, at *1, 3, 5-6, 7, 9; *Jeffreys v. City of New*

York, 426 F.3d at 554.

In any event, the court concludes that plaintiff's retaliation claims against defendants Paquette-Monthie and Gutwein would be subject to dismissal because they would have taken the same actions with respect to the misbehavior report against plaintiff even if they had known of complaints or grievances filed by plaintiff against defendant Rock. See, e.g., *Lowrance v. Achtyl*, 20 F.3d 529, 534-35 (2d Cir. 1994) (defendants met their burden of showing that they would have disciplined the plaintiff even in the absence of the protected conduct because the plaintiff had admitted to engaging in the misconduct that formed the basis of the misbehavior report; plaintiff's retaliation claim was properly dismissed under *Mt. Healthy* and its progeny); *Smith v. Woods*, 2006 WL 1133247, at *10 (the record evidence establishes that the hearing officer could, and indeed would, have reached the same disciplinary hearing decision (and imposed the same penalties) despite any such complaints or grievances by plaintiff—*i.e.*, based upon the evidence as presented to him at plaintiff's disciplinary hearing decision).

The basis of the disciplinary charge against plaintiff was that he violated an order of protection that precluded him from, *inter alia*, all communications and contact, including by “telephone[,]” with his wife and daughters, “except for visits to state correctional facility and correspondence.” (Gutwein Decl. ¶ 6 & Ex. A, Dkt. No. 14-15 at 3). Based on the order of protection, plaintiff had been directed to stop calling his wife by DOCCS staff at Sing Sing, and was not allowed to add his wife to his authorized call list (Dkt. No. 42-15 at 4-5); but plaintiff apparently circumvented

that limitation by listing, under the name of an aunt, the telephone number at the home where his wife came to reside. (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 2, 7, 9, 21-22, 56-58).

During his initial interview with Counselor Paquette-Monthie at Coxsackie, and during the disciplinary hearing, plaintiff acknowledged that he had telephonic contact with his wife from other DOCCS facilities before he was transferred to Coxsackie, at the number listed under his aunt's name on his emergency contact list.²⁷ (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 7, 9, 12, 18, 19-20). He disputed the disciplinary charges because he believed that he should not be charged with misconduct by Coxsackie officials for calls he made to his wife from other institutions. (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 14, 19-20, 26, 35, 44, 46, 52-53, 56). Plaintiff also asserted that the exception for "correspondence" in the order of protection should be interpreted to include telephonic contact, notwithstanding the explicit, prior prohibition in the order against communications by telephone. (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 17, 18, 20, 23, 44-45, 49). Plaintiff claimed that his wife, who was willing to speak with him by phone, and the District Attorney and Judge who caused the order of protection to be entered, would agree that telephonic contact was permissible, notwithstanding the clear language of the order of protection.²⁸ (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 6-7,

²⁷ Defendant Paquette-Monthie and her supervisor testified at the disciplinary hearing that DOCCS phone records confirmed that plaintiff had, indeed, made calls to the number at which plaintiff admitted his wife could be reached. (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 19, 59-60; Dkt. No. 42-15 at 6-13). Plaintiff was allowed to inspect those phone records during the hearing. (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 67, 69).

²⁸ The Order of Protection was apparently modified, on October 28, 2011, after the disciplinary hearing, to allow telephonic contact. (Dkt. No. 36 at 66). However, this reinforces that the Order of Protection in place at the time of the telephonic contact that resulted in the misbehavior report against plaintiff clearly did not authorize contact by phone.

23, 39, 57-58, 61).

The court finds that, although plaintiff made several frivolous arguments that he should be found not guilty, “he admitted to engaging in the conduct that formed the basis of the misbehavior report.” *Lowrance v. Achtyl*, 20 F.3d at 534-35.

Accordingly, I would recommend that summary judgment be granted in favor of the Cocksackie defendants on plaintiff’s retaliation claim, based, *inter alia*, on *Mt. Healthy* and its progeny.

V. Due Process

A. Legal Standards

To begin a due process analysis, the court must determine whether plaintiff had a protected liberty interest in remaining free from the confinement that he challenges, and then determine whether the defendants deprived plaintiff of that liberty interest without due process. *Giano v. Selsky*, 238 F.3d 223, 225 (2d Cir. 2001); *Bedoya v. Coughlin*, 91 F.3d 349, 351 (2d Cir. 1996). In *Sandin v. Conner*, 515 U.S. 472, 484 (1995), the Supreme Court held that although states may create liberty interests for inmates that are protected by due process, “these interests will be generally limited to freedom from restraint which, while not exceeding the sentence in such an unexpected manner as to give rise to protection by the Due Process Clause of its own force . . . , nonetheless imposes atypical and significant hardship on the inmate in relation to the ordinary incidents of prison life.”

The due process protections afforded inmates facing disciplinary hearings that affect a liberty interest include advance written notice of the charges, a fair and

impartial hearing officer, a hearing that affords the inmate the opportunity to call witnesses and present documentary evidence, and a written statement of the evidence upon which the hearing officer relied in making his determination. *Sira v. Morton*, 380 F.3d 57, 69 (2d Cir. 2004) (citing, *inter alia*, *Wolff v. McDonnell*, 418 U.S. 539, 563-67 (1974)). The hearing officer's findings must be supported by "some" "reliable evidence." *Id.* (citing, *inter alia*, *Superintendent v. Hill*, 472 U.S. 445, 455 (1985)).

Violations of state regulations with respect to disciplinary hearings do not, by themselves, necessarily rise to the level of constitutional violations. *See, e.g., Soto v. Walker*, 44 F.3d 169, 173 (2d Cir. 1995) (state law violation does not necessarily rise to the level of a constitutional violation); *Young v. County of Fulton*, 160 F.3d 899, 902 (2d Cir. 1998) (violation of state law is not the "benchmark" for determining whether a constitutional violation has occurred). To establish a procedural due process claim in connection with a prison disciplinary hearing, an inmate must show that he was prejudiced by the alleged procedural deficiencies, in the sense that the errors affected the outcome of the hearing. *See, e.g., Clark v. Dannheim*, 590 F. Supp. 2d 426, 429 (W.D.N.Y. 2008) (citing, *inter alia*, *Powell v. Coughlin*, 953 F.2d 744, 750 (2d Cir.1991) ("it is entirely inappropriate to overturn the outcome of a prison disciplinary proceeding because of a procedural error without making the normal appellate assessment as to whether the error was harmless or prejudicial")).

B. Analysis

The complaint alleges that, in conducting the disciplinary hearing at Coxsackie and finding plaintiff guilty, defendant Gutwein was motivated by a desire to retaliate

against plaintiff for his complaint against defendant Rock at Clinton. Plaintiff also alleges that Hearing Officer Gutwein also improperly denied plaintiff's requests to call key witnesses or obtain documents that would have established his innocence. (Dkt. No. 1 at 7). In plaintiff's prior motion to amend his complaint, which this court denied (Dkt. No. 38 at 7, 9-10), he attempted to supplement his due process claim by alleging that (1) the misbehavior report was deficient because it did not specify the institution from which plaintiff made the offending phone calls to his wife (Dkt. No. 36 at 34); (2) defendant Gutwein improperly disallowed certain questions plaintiff wanted hearing witnesses to answer (Dkt. No. 36 at 33); and (3) plaintiff's assistant was not allowed to contact certain witnesses on his behalf (Dkt. No. 36 at 36). Although not technically part of the complaint, the court will address these allegations.

Defendants, apparently conceding that the disciplinary sanctions imposed on plaintiff at Cocksackie implicated a liberty interest, argue that the plaintiff was afforded all of the process to which he was due at the hearing conducted by defendant Gutwein. (Defs.' Mem. in Support of Rule 12(b)(6) Mot. at 16-20). The court agrees that, based on the record of the disciplinary hearing, no reasonable fact finder could conclude that plaintiff's due process rights were violated or that the outcome of the proceeding would have been any different if he had been allowed to call and question the witnesses and present the documents that he requested.

1. Misbehavior Report

The July 7, 2011 misbehavior report charged plaintiff with violating prison

rules 107.20 (False Statements or Information); 106.10 (Refusing Direct Order); and 121.12 (Phone Program Violation) for making telephone calls to his wife in violation of an order of protection and contrary to direct orders from an officer at Sing Sing, which he managed to do by misleadingly listing his aunt's name as an emergency contact, but at an address and phone number where his wife resided. (Dkt. No. 42-15 at 2). Plaintiff alleges that defendant Paquette-Monthie's misbehavior report provided inadequate notice of the charges because it did not specify the facility from which he made telephone calls to his wife.

The notice required by due process serves to "compel 'the charging officer to be [sufficiently] specific as to the misconduct with which the inmate is charged' to inform the inmate of what he is accused of doing so that he can prepare a defense to those charges and not be made to explain away vague charges set out in a misbehavior report." *Taylor v. Rodriguez*, 238 F.3d 188, 192-93 (2d Cir. 2001) (citation omitted)). However, the Constitution does not demand notice that painstakingly details all facts relevant to the date, place, and manner of charged inmate misconduct. *Sira v. Morton*, 380 F.3d at 72.

Counselor Paquette-Monthie's misbehavior report was based on plaintiff's admissions that he had previously been calling his wife, and the report noted the date in 2009 when plaintiff changed his emergency contact information so he could reach his wife by phone, despite prior orders that he not do so. (Dkt. No. 42-15 at 2). The misbehavior report includes considerable factual detail, and the charges contained therein could certainly not be considered impermissibly vague or conclusory. *Taylor*

v. Rodriguez, 238 F.3d at 193 (due process requires more than a conclusory charge). The fact that the misbehavior report did not specify the institution(s) from which plaintiff impermissibly called his wife did not impede him from establishing that he made no such calls from Coxsackie and pursuing the defense, albeit a frivolous one, that he could not be charged at Coxsackie for conduct committed at prior facilities. (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 14, 19-20, 26, 35, 44, 46, 53, 56).

2. Witnesses and Exhibits

During the hearing, plaintiff requested the following witnesses on his behalf: defendant Paquette-Monthie; her supervisor; plaintiff's wife; the District Attorney and the judge who were involved with the Order of Protection; plaintiff's wife's lawyer; plaintiff's criminal defense lawyer; and a staff member from the Office of Mental Health. (Gutwein Decl. ¶ 8; Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 4-8). The hearing officer called only Counselor Paquette-Monthie and Supervising Counselor Chenel to testify, and both were questioned extensively by plaintiff, although defendant Gutwein screened many of plaintiff's questions. (Gutwein Decl. ¶¶ 9-10; Disc. Hrg. at 8-43, 43-61).

Plaintiff, in his motion to amend the complaint, alleged that Hearing Officer Gutwein "would not allow me to question witnesses with questions that proved I was being ret[a]liated for no reasons but for[] filing a complaint against the coun[s]elor['s] friend C.O. P. Rock." (Dkt. No. 36 at 33). Hearing Officer Gutwein allowed the witnesses to answer some, but not all questions by which plaintiff tried to establish that Counselor Paquette-Monthie filed the misbehavior report against him because of her "bias" and motive for "revenge." But, plaintiff never sought to ask any question

as to whether the counselor initiated the charges because plaintiff had filed a prior complaint against C.O. Rock or any other friend at Clinton. (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 15, 27, 28, 33-34, 38, 40, 42-43, 54, 55).²⁹

The mere fact that plaintiff's questions for witnesses had to be filtered through the hearing officer did not violate due process. *See Baxter v. Palmigiano*, 425 U.S. 308, 322-23 & n.5 (1976) (inmates are not entitled to the right to confront and cross-examine witnesses at a disciplinary hearing). The plaintiff's tone during the entire disciplinary hearing was argumentative, and many of his proposed questions reflected a dogged, but unfocused effort to induce Counselor Paquette-Monthie to admit she was, for whatever reason, biased against the plaintiff. During the disciplinary hearing, defendant Paquette-Monthie clearly testified that she initiated the charges against plaintiff because of the perceived seriousness of his misconduct, and "was not playing any dirty politics . . . behind the scenes." (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 26, 28). The hearing officer reasonably denied many of the plaintiff's other questions about the counselor's alleged bias because they were repetitive and bordered on harassment. In any event, it is clear from defendant Paquette-Monthie's declaration (¶¶ 12-17, Dkt. No. 42-12), that if plaintiff had actually tried to ask her at the hearing whether she was retaliating against him at the behest of C.O. Rock or others from Clinton, she would have flatly

²⁹ Plaintiff asked Supervising Counselor Chenel, with respect to the misbehavior report against him, "was there any complaint initially by any outside services . . . or was there anything written from another facility, uh, – retaliate or anything like that?" Hearing Officer rephrased the questions: "to your knowledge was there any outside contact with regard to the Order of Protection being violated?" and Supervising Counselor Chenel answered "No." (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 54).

denied it. Thus, plaintiff cannot establish prejudice, because even if defendant Gutwein had disallowed such questions (which, again, plaintiff never asked), allowing Counselor Paquette-Monthie to answer would have not favored plaintiff or changed the outcome of the hearing.³⁰

Plaintiff's request to call his wife and a number of people involved in the prior case that resulted in the order of protection, was premised on his claim that these witnesses would put the order in "context" and clarify that plaintiff was, in fact, allowed to speak with his wife by telephone. (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 6-7, 22, 23, 39, 57-58, 61). Although due process includes a right to call witnesses, this right is not unfettered. *Alicea v. Howell*, 387 F. Supp. 2d 227, 234 (W.D.N.Y. 2005) (citing *Ponte v. Real*, 471 U.S. 491, 495 (1985)). This right may be limited for security reasons, to keep a hearing within reasonable limits, or on the basis of irrelevance or lack of necessity. *Id.* (citing, *inter alia*, *Kingsley v. Bureau of Prisons*, 937 F.2d 26, 30 (2d Cir. 1991) (a hearing officer does not violate due process by excluding irrelevant or

³⁰ See *Clark v. Dannheim*, 590 F. Supp. 2d at 429-31 (to establish a procedural due process claim in connection with a prison disciplinary hearing, an inmate must show that he was prejudiced by the alleged procedural errors, in the sense that the errors affected the outcome of the hearing) (collecting cases). Toward the end of the hearing, plaintiff requested that witnesses Paquette-Monthie and Chenel be recalled for further questioning; but he would not explain what new questions he wanted to ask these witnesses. (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 63-66). Hearing Officer Gutwein denied plaintiff's request to recall these witnesses because plaintiff failed to articulate any additional information that they could provide that would not be redundant of their lengthy, prior testimony. (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 66, 71-72; Dkt. No. 42-15 at 93). Defendant Gutwein's stated reasons for not recalling these witnesses were reasonably related to a correctional goal and did not, based on the authority cited below, violate due process. In any event, because plaintiff never articulated how recalling these two witnesses would have helped him or changed the outcome of the disciplinary hearing, he cannot establish that he was prejudiced by the hearing officer's ruling.

unnecessary testimony or evidence). An inmate's due process rights are violated when a prison hearing officer refuses to interview witnesses without assigning a reason "logically related to preventing undue hazards to 'institutional safety or correctional goals.'" *Ponte v. Real*, 471 U.S. at 497.

Hearing Officer Gutwein denied plaintiff's request to call his wife as a witness, because to do so would violate the order of protection. Defendant Gutwein also declined to call the other witnesses involved with the prior order of protection because their testimony would not be relevant. (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 61-63; Dkt. No. 42-15 at 95-96).³¹ As noted above, the order of protection explicitly precluded plaintiff from having telephonic or other communications with his wife, and created an exception that allowed only prison visits and "correspondence." (Dkt. No. 42-15 at 3). Given the clarity of the order of protection, and the prior order of a DOCCS official that

³¹ On July 20, 2011, Hearing Officer Gutwein provided plaintiff with copies of form 2176 explaining, in writing, the reasons for his refusal to call each witness. Plaintiff demanded that the hearing officer state on the record his reasons for refusing to call the District Attorney involved with the prior order of protection, and defendant Gutwein did not do so. (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 62-63). On July 21, 2011, when the hearing resumed, plaintiff complained that he could not read script, and the hearing officer orally explained his reasons to deny plaintiff's new request to recall witnesses Paquette-Monthie and Chenel on the record, apparently because the 2176 forms prepared that morning were handwritten in script. (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 70-72). Once he announced his problems with reading script, plaintiff did not renew his request that the hearing officer orally explain the reasons for not calling the District Attorney, which were written in script on form 2176 the day before. (*Id.*). In his prior rulings on various questions plaintiff posed to the witnesses, the hearing officer made clear that the various persons involved in the prior order of protection had nothing relevant to offer with respect to the pending charges. (*See, e.g.*, Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 23, 40, 49). In any event, as long as a hearing officer articulates a reason for not calling a witness that is logically related to correctional goals, due process does not require that he do so during the hearing, even if state law requires a contemporaneous finding. *Duffy v. Selsky*, 95 CIV. 0474, 1996 WL 407225, at *10 (S.D.N.Y. Jul. 18, 1996) (the Supreme Court has held that the proffer of the explanation for not calling a witness need not be contemporaneous with the hearing) (citing *Ponte v. Real*, 471 U.S. at 497).

plaintiff refrain from telephone contact with his wife, calling other witnesses to “explain” or put into “context” the order of protection would have been unnecessary and irrelevant. Accordingly, Hearing Officer Gutwein did not violate plaintiff’s due process rights by refusing to call these witnesses.³²

Plaintiff requested that his medical and mental health records be produced at the hearing, claiming they would indicate that his wife was listed as his emergency contact and that, therefore, he had permission from DOCCS staff at Clinton to call his wife.³³ (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 7, 59). In fact, plaintiff’s position that his emergency contact information contained the address and phone number where his wife could be reached was repeatedly placed on the record during the hearing, and was accepted by the witnesses and the hearing officer. (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 9, 12, 18-19, 29, 36, 37, 56-57, 60, 72-73). However, the DOCCS witnesses and hearing officer documented that the name plaintiff associated with that emergency contact information was that of his aunt, not his wife, and viewed this as evidence that plaintiff was misleading DOCCS staff so he could make calls to his wife, despite orders to the contrary. (*Id.*)

Plaintiff, while apparently conceding that he used his wife’s address and phone number, but not her name, in his emergency contact information (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 7;

³² Given that these witnesses had no relevant information to offer, plaintiff’s complaint that his assistant was not allowed to interview these witnesses also fails to support a due process claim.

³³ Plaintiff initially requested witnesses from the health units, but he did not persist in that request after Counselor Paquette-Monthie and Supervising Counselor Chenel testified. (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 7, 61). Hearing Officer Gutwein nonetheless prepared copies of form 2176 explaining that these witnesses would not be called because the proposed testimony would not be relevant. (Dkt. No. 42-15 at 94-95).

Dkt. No. 36 at 35), argued that he disclosed, to Counselor Paquette-Monthie at Coxsackie, that his aunt subsequently moved from that residence and his wife moved in. (Disc. Hrg. at 12-13, 37, 56-57, 60). However, plaintiff was charged, not with misleading defendant Paquette-Monthie at Coxsackie, but with misleading staff at other DOCCS facilities by listing his wife's contact information under his aunt's name. (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 2; Inmate Misbehavior Report, Dkt. No. 48-15 at 2). Plaintiff's position on this point is a variation on his frivolous defense that he could not be charged at Coxsackie for misconduct he previously committed at a prior institution. (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 37). Accordingly, when Hearing Officer Gutwein ruled that documentary or testimonial evidence from DOCCS health units about plaintiff's emergency contact information was not relevant (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 10; Dkt. No. 42-15 at 94-95), he was pursuing a legitimate correctional goal of avoiding redundant and irrelevant evidence, and did not violate plaintiff's due process rights. See, e.g., *Clyde v. Bellnier*, 9:08-CV-909 (JKS), 2010 WL 1489897, at *6 (N.D.N.Y. April 13, 2010) (no due process violation arose when the hearing officer failed to provide documents that did not exist or that were not relevant to the defense).³⁴

3. Sufficiency of the Evidence

As discussed in section IV B 4. above, plaintiff essentially admitted all of the conduct which formed the basis of the disciplinary charges against him, and his

³⁴ The court notes that Hearing Officer Gutwein provided plaintiff with copies of requested documents discussed during the hearing, and once adjourned the hearing so plaintiff could get a copy of a document he claimed he needed to continue questioning a witness. (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 31, 66-71).

“defenses” were frivolous. The testimony of Counselor Paquette-Monthie (*see, e.g.*, Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 9, 18-19, 21-22) and Supervising Counselor Chenel (*see, e.g.*, Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 46, 49, 56-57, 59-60), along with the supporting documents (Dkt. No. 42-15 at 2-14), provided far more support for defendant Gutwein’s guilty finding than the “some” “reliable evidence” standard requires to satisfy due process. (Disc. Hrg. Tr. at 72-73; Dkt. No. 42-15 at 98-99).³⁵

4. Hearing Officer Bias

“An inmate subject to a disciplinary proceeding is entitled to an impartial hearing officer.” *Allen v. Cuomo*, 100 F. 3d at 253, 259 (2d Cir. 1996). An impartial hearing officer is “one who, *inter alia*, does not prejudge the evidence and who cannot say . . . how he would assess the evidence he has not yet seen.” *Patterson v. Coughlin*, 905 F.2d 564, 569–70 (2d Cir. 1990); *Francis v. Coughlin*, 891 F.2d 43, 46 (2d Cir. 1989) (“it would be improper for prison officials to decide the disposition of a case before it was heard”).

It is well settled, however, “that prison disciplinary officers are not held to the same standard of neutrality as adjudicators in other contexts.” *Allen v. Cuomo*, 100 F.3d at 259. “The degree of impartiality required of prison officials does not rise to the level of that required of judges generally.” *Id.* An inmate’s own subjective belief that the hearing officer was biased is insufficient to create a genuine issue of material fact. *Francis v. Coughlin*, 891 F.2d 43, 47 (2d Cir.1989); *Clyde v. Schoellkopf*, 714 F.

³⁵ The hearing office stated the basis for his finding on the disciplinary charges both in writing and on the record at the hearing. (*Id.*).

Supp. 2d 432, 437-38 (W.D.N.Y. 2010).

The unsupported allegations that defendant Gutwein conspired with the other defendants to retaliate against plaintiff in connection with the disciplinary proceedings at Cossackie (discussed above) are insufficient to establish that he was a biased hearing officer. *See, e.g., Bunting v. Nagy*, 452 F. Supp. 2d 447, 460-61 (S.D.N.Y. 2006) (in order to defeat a motion for summary judgment, a plaintiff-inmate must “be armed with [something] more than conclusory allegations of bias and prejudgment” of the disciplinary hearing officer) (quoting *Francis v. Coughlin*, 891 F.2d at 47). The transcript of the disciplinary hearing demonstrates that Hearing Officer Gutwein displayed great patience in dealing with plaintiff’s argumentative demeanor and his persistence in pursuing frivolous lines of witness questioning. Given the weight of the evidence supporting plaintiff’s guilt and the fact that defendant Gutwein’s various rulings regarding witnesses and documentary evidence clearly comported with due process, no reasonable fact finder could conclude that he was an unconstitutionally biased hearing officer.

WHEREFORE, based on the findings above, it is

RECOMMENDED, that defendants’ motion for summary judgment (Dkt. No. 42) be **GRANTED** on the grounds stated herein, and that plaintiff’s complaint be **DISMISSED** in its entirety; and it is further

RECOMMENDED, that plaintiff’s motions for preliminary injunctions (Dkt. Nos. 54, 58) be **DENIED AS MOOT**; and it is further

ORDERED, that plaintiff’s motion for appointment of counsel (Dkt. No. 58) be

DENIED.

Pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1) and Local Rule 72.1(c), the parties have fourteen (14) days within which to file written objections to the foregoing report. Such objections shall be filed with the Clerk of the Court. **FAILURE TO OBJECT TO THIS REPORT WITHIN FOURTEEN DAYS WILL PRECLUDE APPELLATE REVIEW.** *Roldan v. Racette*, 984 F.2d 85, 89 (2d Cir. 1993) (citing *Small v. Sec. of Health & Human Servs.*, 892 F.2d 15 (2d Cir. 1989)); 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); Fed. R. Civ. P. 6(a), 6(e), 72.

Dated: January 17, 2014



Hon. Andrew T. Baxter
U.S. Magistrate Judge